

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS
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An annual reminder that we can all be something bigger

This issue, as the enormous number five on the cover makes clear, is about longevity. In the fastest-moving form of entertainment on the planet, change is a necessity if you want to stick around. Yet it's also essential to stay true to your roots. The aim of a sequel is twofold, after all: to give existing fans more of what they fell in love with, while adding something fresh in order to attract a wider audience of new players.

In this issue's cover story, *Devil May Cry 5* director Hideaki Itsuno talks about what he calls the *Plus Alpha* element: the extra layer of mechanical complexity that fans expect from a sequel. Yet it is also a risky business, since making an already complex game such as *Devil May Cry* even more so is hardly going to win over the masses. Itsuno's answer to this problem in *DMC5* is an all-new third protagonist, which puts players of all levels of experience on an even footing. It's a smart solution to an age-old problem.

Elsewhere this month we find other creators wrestling with similar themes. What's the secret to ploughing the same furrow, and continuing to find success? A few short years ago, Unity was the king of thirdparty game engines. Yet a resurgent Unreal Engine, buoyed by the success of its maker's own *Fortnite*, has taken its place, particularly among developers making multiplayer games. Beginning on p8, we discover how Unity intends to make up lost ground. And in Collected Works, we shine a spotlight on Yasuyuki Oda, who's been making fighting games for 25 years and shows no signs of slowing up.

However you stitch it, the real key to longevity is quality. You can mix in all the clever new flavours you like, but if the core ingredients aren't good enough, you don't stand a chance. Itsuno's *Plus Alpha* philosophy has certainly reaped dividends, but the real secret of *Devil May Cry*'s success is the irresistibly stylish combat system that lies at the game's heart. Beginning on p60, we find how Capcom is building on that foundation to deliver what already looks like the first essential game of 2019.



Exclusive subscriber edition



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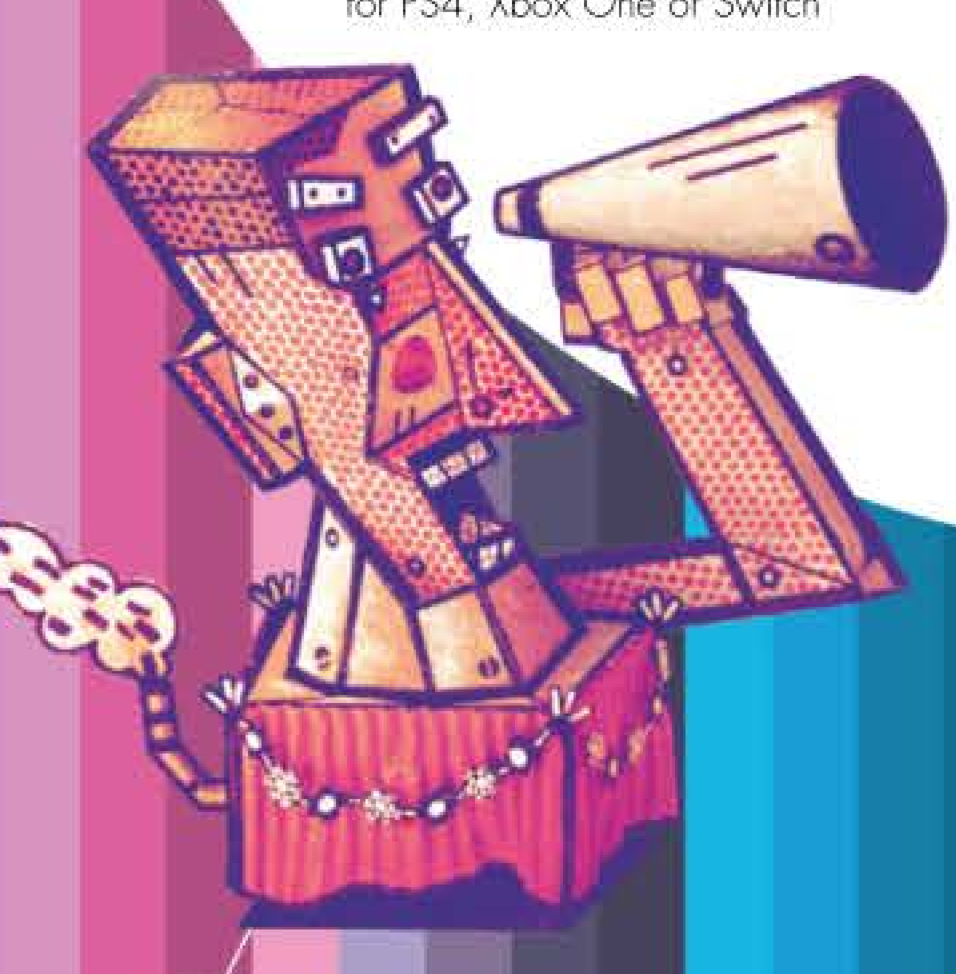
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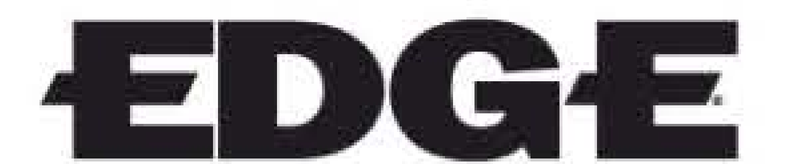
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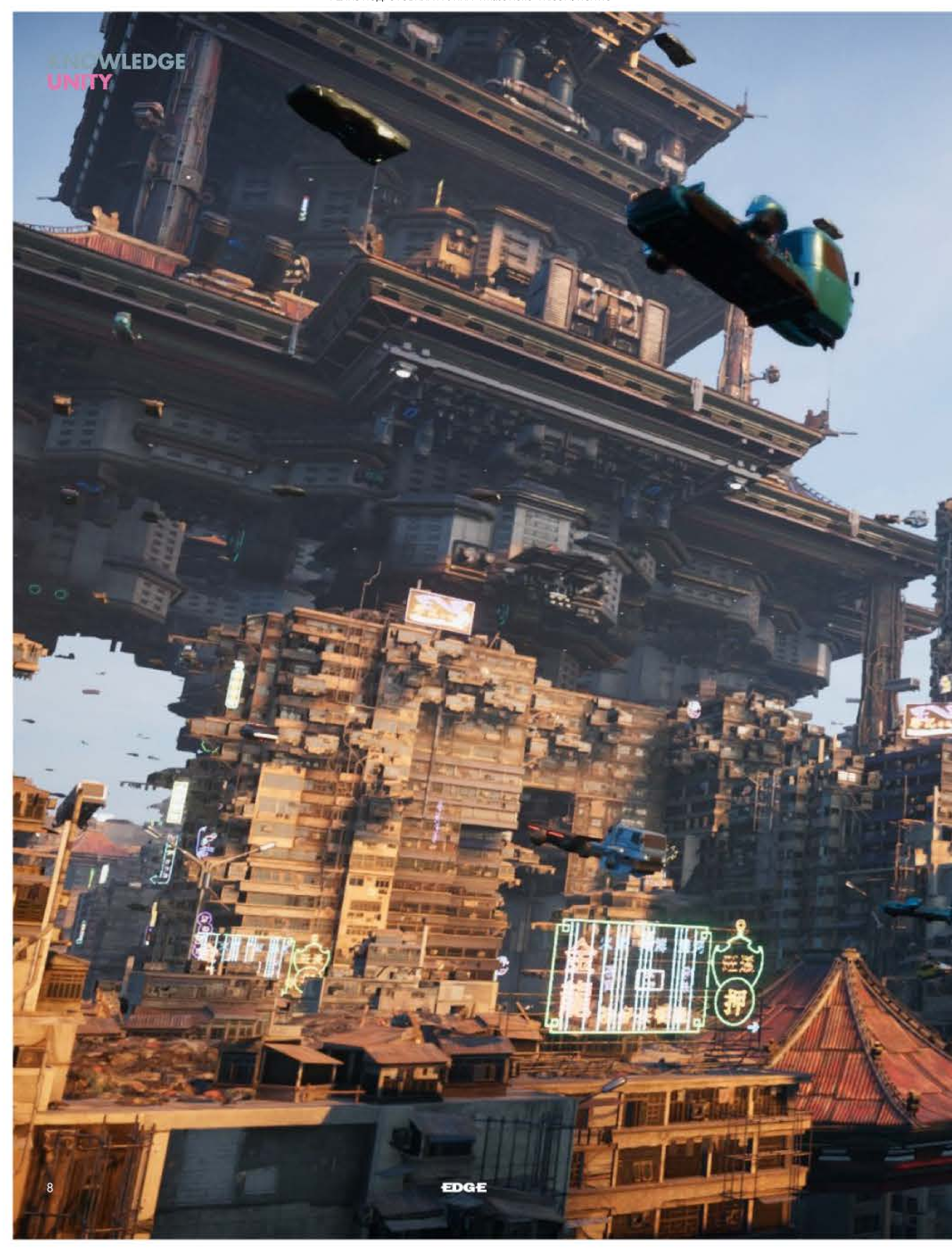
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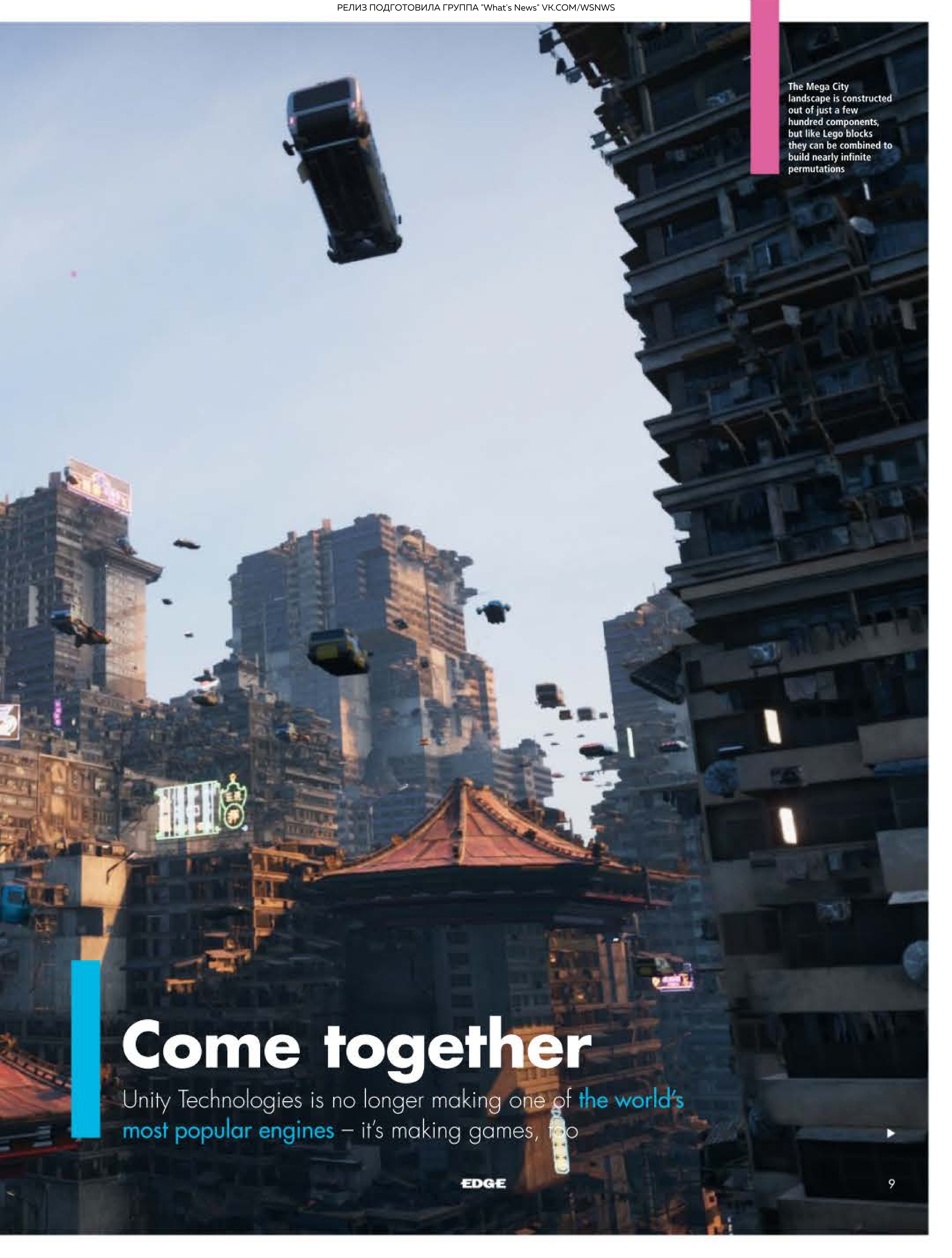
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The Mega City landscape is constructed out of just a few hundred components, but like Lego blocks they can be combined to build nearly infinite permutations

Come together

Unity Technologies is no longer making one of the world's most popular engines – it's making games, too

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There's a common refrain that we hear repeatedly during our trip to the Copenhagen offices of Unity Technologies, the maker of one of the most popular game engines on the planet: "We don't make games." VP of engineering **Brett Bibby** says it a good few times, adding, "We are the 600-person-strong engine team for every developer". Or, "We're successful only if our customers are successful." Smart stuff, you'd think, for a company in the business of making tools – but in an effort to beat the competition, Unity has now started developing its own games, too.

Since its foundation in 2004, Unity's central mission statement has been "democratising development". That means producing tools intended to make it easier for developers to create games – and offering them for free to smaller studios. A big part of that ambition has been about helping developers to fill game worlds with minimum effort. A quick glance at the Unity Asset Store will turn up free packages of highly detailed trees and rocks, or parts enough to build your own 2D platformer.

Unity's tools for this are only getting better, as we'll find out during the course of our visit – but sheer scale of content isn't the only thing that matters for the company today. *Fortnite*, after all, has shown how you can have just a single map and still be the biggest game in the world.

Fortnite represents something of a problem for Unity. Along with other recent multiplayer hits including *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds* and *Ark: Survival Evolved*, it was built on Unity's main competitor, Unreal Engine 4. Moreover, its success has helped reshape the engine itself. Unity has described *Fortnite* as a "development sandbox", guiding the way TV-sized games get ported to mobile and pushing the engine to optimise its multiplayer performance for much larger groups of players. That makes Unreal even more attractive for anyone looking to develop the next world-dominating multiplayer game.

Meanwhile, developers using Unity – of which there are over a million active each month – are more likely to be creating smaller independent projects such as recent success stories *Hollow Knight*, *Overcooked* and *BattleTech*. On the horizon, the most high-profile titles being built with Unity include Moon Studios' *Ori And The Will Of The Wisps*, and Campo Santo's *In The Valley Of Gods*. All exciting games that will do well, but *Fortnite* has moved the goalposts somewhat. If Unity does have an equivalent, it's *Pokémon Go* – but the workings of that game are so particular that it can't really serve as a blueprint for success. "The next big first-party game for the PS5 being made in Unity," Bibby says, daydreaming. "That's what success looks like."

In the meantime, though, Unity is planning to just produce its own paragons of what the engine has to offer today's developers. So, yes, at least temporarily, Unity does make games. Not full ones, but sample games that it's hoping will inspire developers. The first of which, probably not coincidentally, is a multiplayer FPS.

> "For a lot of people, tinkering and experimenting is a very effective way of learning things"

This as-yet-untitled shooter has been built by a team of six, formed last August specifically for this project. They're led by programmer **Peter Andreasen**, who has spent around two decades on the other side of the fence, working on games such as *Hitman: Blood Money* and *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*. "We wanted to do a multiplayer game, to show users how you can do it in Unity," Andreasen tells us. "We heard a lot from our users that they would like to do multiplayer, but it's a pretty tricky thing to enter into, so we'd like to give them a starting point."

This is the entire point of the game's existence. Everything from its asymmetrical design to the backstory of its world was picked because it serves the technology on which it is built. The action sees a race of alien terraformers struggle with native robotic miners, as each group tries to capture and defend three points on the map.

This set-up was, Andreasen admits, "an excuse to produce a wide range of content". The two races allowed his team to develop two distinct character classes, with their own weapon types. The fiction, such as it is, led to a map that runs from barren wasteland, through industrial interiors, to exotic flora.

The game wasn't primarily designed to be fun – although there's much whooping and hollering as the rest of the dev team duke it out during our visit. Like a regular tech demo, it's a showcase for what Unity is capable of. On top of that, though, it's intended to be a learning tool – for developers that use the engine, certainly, but also for Unity itself.

"Ideally, users who are building their own game can look in here and they can say, 'Okay, this lighting, I'd like something like that in my game', and they can open it up and see how it's done," Andreasen says. "We left all the tools in there. It's not just the runtime aspect of the game, it's also the different editor tools that everyone has to build in order to make a production. So we left them here for people to take and maybe use in their own projects."

There's a hope that this sample game might also provide an access point for people looking to take their first steps from playing to creating. "Many of us actually entered development by modding, or programming stuff that had been open-sourced," says Andreasen of his team. "For a lot of people, tinkering and experimenting is a very effective way of learning things."

Meanwhile, within Unity, the sample game is a way of testing new features in a controlled reality before sending them into the world, like an internal beta test. Or, to use the tech company parlance, 'dogfooding' – using your own products to better understand their problems and thus, potentially, the solutions. ▶


Brett Bibby, VP of engineering

HEART'S CONTENT
One way that Unity is trying to make the development process easier is by closing the gap between programmers and artists. It currently has basic SketchUp-style 3D modelling tools within its editor, so anyone can make tweaks to game objects there and then, but the future plans for its visual tools are much more ambitious. "In the next, probably, year or so, an artist who doesn't even know programming could take Unity, put in content, create an experience, use visual scripting to wire it all together, press a button and generate code that is more performant than a 20-year veteran programmer could write by hand," says Brett Bibby. "That's going to completely change the world."

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These days, like most tech firms, Unity is technically headquartered in San Francisco, but the sample game was built in Copenhagen, where the company was founded. It's a truly global concern these days, though, with a presence in 25 countries worldwide



The sample game's visuals are, at least partly by design, perfectly generic – the rusting structures of *Doom*, the chunky alien weaponry of *Destiny* and the smooth sands of *Rage 2*

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The team's glass-fronted office is located (intentionally, we're told) right in the midst of the R&D department, to encourage colleagues walking past to poke in their head and mention a new feature that could do with testing, or to ask for feedback on something.

It all sounds great in theory. But in practice, what have they actually learned from the project? Andreasen can't point to any dramatic changes to Unity that have been specifically triggered by the development of this game. It's mostly improvements within optimisation and performance, he says. Okay – so, given the team don't have to worry about sales like most game developers, what does success look like?

"Because all of us have a background in game development, we constantly think about, 'What would someone like me find useful, if I was on the outside?' So the best test of whether something is useful is if it makes other people successful. If, in a couple of years, I meet some game developer who has made a runaway hit with Unity, sold ten million copies, and I figure out that team started with this sample game, even if they ended up changing every single line of code… I'll be very happy. That'll be success for me."

If the sample game is a reflection of what off-the-shelf engines need to offer developers today, we're also shown a more traditional tech demo, with a much grander scope, that shows what Unity will be capable of in future. A flying car, looking like it could have been ripped straight from the original Blade Runner, darts between brutalist towers lit by dusty sunlight. It's Gormenghast as cityscape, a sprawl of gnarled skyscrapers peppered with neon signs and exoskeletons of scaffolding, that stretches horizontally and vertically as far as you can see.

Flying through the midst of all this spectacle, it's hard not to feel the influence of a certain E3 demo on this cyberpunk vista. But, honestly, it makes Night City look positively provincial, albeit with a few important caveats. This is a city populated only by other airborne vehicles, forming lines of traffic in the sky above and below, rather than the street-level bustle that CD Projekt has been showing off. And it is, at least for now, strictly a tech demo. Nonetheless, the sheer scale is dizzying. There are somewhere in the region of ten million game objects in this demo, we're told, and 3.5 million of them are visible at any one time. A large-scale Unity game apparently contains around 100,000 – equivalent to just one building in this city.

Remarkably, this scene was all built by two artists, on loan from another project, in the space of three weeks. At least, its skeleton was – production of the individual high-res assets was outsourced to external artists. Unity has built an entire city just to show off the latest feature offered by its game engine: the not especially sexy-sounding 'nested prefabs'. The team use various analogies to explain these – "building blocks", "Russian dolls", "Lego" – but ultimately, they're just a smart extension of how Unity handles assets.

"A prefab is a reusable object," **Nikoline Hoegh**, user experience designer at Unity, tells us. "An object could be a can, trash bags, a building – these are all game objects in the world. I can put an object somewhere, create a lot of copies of it, and if I update just one of them, they're all going to change. This was already the existing system, and the way that games and worlds are built with Unity today. What's new on top of that is the ability to basically take a prefab and put it inside another."

> There are somewhere in the region of ten million game objects in this demo, we're told

This allows smaller objects, from walls to window shutters to air-conditioning units, to be assembled into bigger tilesets, which can in turn be combined to form blocks as large as an entire skyscraper. It is, essentially, tilesets all the way down. If this sounds like it would make for repetitive environments – well, that's not visible in the final result. Risk crashing your hovercar to go in for a closer look, and you might notice some of the same neon signs dotted around, but the overall effect is of something bespoke. The buildings are formed, almost coral-like, out of apartment-sized protrusions, and it's hard to spot any patterns in the way they're arranged.

Unity claims this kind of environment simply couldn't be built without nested prefabs. It believes the feature will solve a problem that's putting strain on even the biggest developers as they push for increasingly open worlds – the sheer workload involved in creating high-fidelity environments at scale. "If you look at the explosion in resolution, I can't build 50 levels of 8K-display-worthy rich photorealistic content," says Bibby. "It's too much work."

There is talk of spinning out the Mega City project into its own sample game in future, but it's just one of the options being discussed. "What Peter's group is doing is moving us from being [neutral] Switzerland to something more opinionated," says Bibby. "If we were going to build an FPS, this is how we would build it – and we want to do that in different genres."

The idea is to package each sample game with all the bespoke solutions you'd need to make something in that mould. RTS, MMO and fighting games are all on Unity's hitlist. Each of those is a primarily multiplayer genre, but each requires very different technology, from renderer to network architecture.

This is part of a broader move by Unity, towards offering a more modular tool to developers. "We believe that one size does not fit all," Bibby says. The idea is that it will offer specific engine packages for individual genres. And beyond that, developers will be able to customise Unity, stripping away any tools they don't need in order to create the engine which best suits their specific project – whether that's an eye-catching indie game or, perhaps, the next world-dominating multiplayer shooter. ■

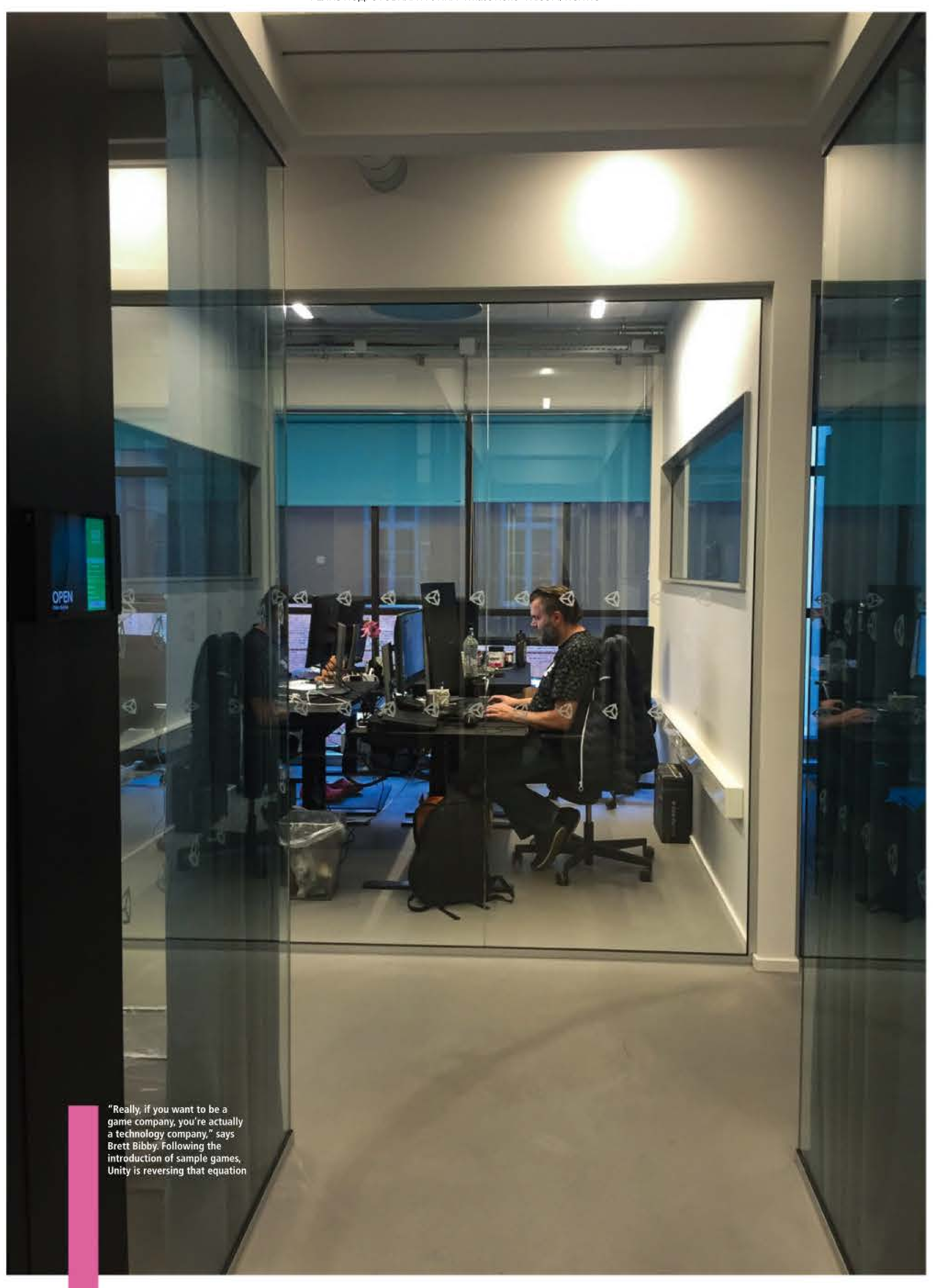
TEAM PLAYER
Unity is seriously trying to get its act together on multiplayer. Last year, it acquired Multiplay, the game server hosting business formerly owned by UK retailer Game, for £19m. In June, it announced a partnership with Google Cloud to provide developers with server infrastructure. "The insight that we've had is that most networking is jack-of-all-trades. It's just, 'here's a networking solution, it's general purpose' – and that's no longer going to work," says Brett Bibby. "So we're doing multiple network solutions now, not just one. The RTS network solution will get you deterministic lockstep connectivity that you need out of the box, you won't need to build that on top of a generic solution. And the FPS one is going to get you what you need, with prediction and all the things that come with that, with server-side simulation of those things."





Peter Andreasen, programmer, and Nikoline Hoegh, user experience designer

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"Really, if you want to be a game company, you're actually a technology company," says Brett Bibby. Following the introduction of sample games, Unity is reversing that equation

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This good

Boutique console maker Analogue turns to the second side of the 16bit era

Sega seems to be having trouble completing its Mega Drive Mini, its take on Nintendo's Classic consoles. In September it announced that it was delaying launch to 2019, giving a chance to review its design so it better matches its source hardware. While it works, however, another challenger has emerged, offering a fundamentally perfect representation of Sega's 16bit classic.

The Mega Sg is the next console from Analogue, maker of the SNES-playing Super Nt (see **E**318). And when it's released next year, it won't just play Mega Drive games. It will also support Master System titles, Game Gear, SG-1000, Mark III, SC-3000, Sega MyCard and Sega CD, each from all regions. "All the more esoteric stuff for which, of course, there's a limited demographic, the hardcore of hardcore," Analogue founder **Christopher Taber** tells us. "We did it because we wanted to make the be-all-end-all Sega system for everything pre-Saturn."

Like the Super Nt, the Mega Sg is built to exactly replicate the hardware functions of its host consoles, so it provides a perfectly accurate and lag-free play experience but with HDMI-out so it plays on a modern TV. And, like the Super Nt, it sports fantastic industrial design, its plastic shell evoking the design of the Mega Drive with modern style in place of nostalgia, as well as easily circumventing any suggestion of it being a knockoff. After all, Analogue's consoles celebrate the original hardware they're designed for. They're not emulators, and they require the original cartridges to play games. They work using Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA), general-purpose chips which can be programmed to behave in specific ways, thus mirroring all the components on a Mega Drive, Master System and everything else the Mega Sg supports, so the system behaves exactly like them.

The chip is again the work of engineer Kevin Horton, who has worked for over 20 years to unpack the secrets of how console systems work and then reproduce the way data flows through them in FPGA. The Mega Sg's 8bit system support largely comes directly from multiple systems he's designed in the past, but Mega Drive support is new and took him a year of work after completing Super Nt. "No one has ever fully implemented Super Nintendo and Mega Drive in FPGA before," he says.

> With the big hitters from the 16bit era covered, it's not so clear where Analogue will go next

Besides Mega Drive, the Mega Sg will also support Sega CD with a port that is located on its side, exactly where it is on a real Mega Drive, that plugs into an original drive. Master System games will connect with Mega Sg through an adaptor for its cartridge slot that's supplied in the box, while the other systems will require separately available $10 adaptors. The aim is to keep the main console low-priced – it'll go on sale in March 2019 at the same price as the Super Nt, $189.99, while leaving flexible options open for aficionados.

The Mega Sg marks the third product on Analogue's roster alongside Super Nt and Mini Nt, an aluminium-built luxury take on the NES. "We always planned on doing it," Taber says. But from here, with the big hitters from 16bit era covered, it's not so clear where it will go next. After all, every new generation adds a new level of work Horton needs to do to reproduce it.

"When you go from 8bit to 16bit, it's like 10 times as complex, and 16bit to 32bit is 20 times as complex," Taber says. "But 32bit is not impossible. Beyond 32bit... that's where it gets extraordinarily complex."

But while the idea of an Analogue reimagining of Saturn or PlayStation is captivating, Taber currently loves the idea of making a handheld. Specifically, handhelds that got left in the shadow of Game Boy. "They're the systems that are inspiring to me. I keep thinking about a Wonderswan with an OLED screen," he says. "That would be so fucking cool. It had so many unique games, it was a super-boutique system, only released in Japan, but designed by Gunpei Yokoi."

Don't get too excited – it's just a dream, for now at least. But as the breakout success of Nintendo's Classic Mini SNES and NES consoles continues to reverberate, it points towards where Analogue sees itself. Especially now Sony's getting in on the act with PlayStation Classic. "I'm stoked to see how well they make it," Taber says, pointing to the fact that the first PS3 models had PS2 chips onboard so they played PS2 games natively. "I would love to see that with the PlayStation."

Most mainstream classic consoles are based on emulation, on modern chips rather than original hardware, so they can support save-states and other quality-of-life features that help the older generations meet modern expectations. Analogue's consoles don't, instead remaining fixed on fidelity, perfectly recreating the way older games were designed to play on today's beautiful displays. This approach isn't for everyone, but when Analogue claims that the Mega Sg will be the "definitive way to explore Sega's 16bit and 8bit era", it's backed by a proven ambition to do precisely that. ■

REFERENCE QUALITY
As a result of a hurriedly deleted tweet and a history of producing licenced Sega-branded consoles, it was assumed that manufacturer AtGames would be making Sega's Mega Drive Mini, though after the project was delayed it became less clear they're still involved. "It's going to be cool to see what Sega does, but AtGames is the worst fucking company of all time," says Taber. "Everything they make is legit fucking garbage. I don't even know how people buy shit like that." But, he believes, Nintendo's Classic consoles have raised the bar. "And that gives justice and respect to the product." Besides, for Taber, good quality emulation means more players learning to appreciate high fidelity, and more who will understand and buy into Analogue's vision.

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Mega Sg will be available in four versions, referencing the Mega Drive's varying designs in different territories



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GREY MATTER

Krillbite's monochromatic new tale prompts you to live life in colour

Inspired by the work of artists such as Michal Sawtyruk and James Gilleard, this is the story of a grey-faced character making his way to his grey job in a grey city. Though you often find yourself naturally following the crowds, *Mosaic* tries to tempt you from your daily routine. "Colour is deeply connected to the narrative and the shifting emotional state of the protagonist," art lead **Karoline O Aske** says. A yellow sunbeam to your left might draw you to a rare patch of quiet nature in the city, before you continue on. Surreal, daydream-like sequences turn up more colour: at one point you take control of a passing butterfly. "A game about commuting to work in itself is rather boring," designer **Adrian Tingstad Husby** says. "These sequences provide spice to an otherwise bleak experience."

Mosaic hopes to make players think twice, encouraging them to stray from the path and into another reality. "We're trying to mix a stylised and a realistic look," Aske says. "I think this contrast evokes a familiar feeling, but also a place where you feel like you don't belong." Prepare to set foot in the city yourself on PC and consoles in summer 2019. ■

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Aske on *Mosaic*'s contrasting art style: "We're using a minimalist shape language, harsh contours and smooth gradients, but lighting and texture towards making an immersive and relatable place"

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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Everybody is talking about battle royale, but there are 15 different companies making those games, and like mobile, only two will be successful. **Many will be killed** along the way."

Well yes, Ubisoft CCO **Serge Hascoet**, that's kind of how battle royale works



"We wouldn't have enough to bring people all together in some location in North America. We don't want to **set our expectations high** and not deliver on them."

PlayStation's US chief **Shawn Layden** explains why there won't be a PSX this year – without mentioning PS5



"We've **successfully negotiated with Telltale Games**… We can't lose Andrew Lincoln and Clementine in the same year."

Remember, The Walking Dead creator **Robert Kirkman**, you can't make an omelette without breaking a few Eggs

"There is a sense of urgency. In big companies, **we tend to become complacent** easily when we get some kind of recovery in profit so we really have to be careful."



Sony CEO **Kenichiro Yoshida** becomes the latest exec to pledge there'll be no repeat of the hubris that gave us PS3. We'll see

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Vrsus
Manufacturer Vres

In **Edge** 323's Collected Works, Sega's chief creative officer Toshihiro Nagoshi told us what it was like to work with Yu Suzuki during the company's arcade heyday. Suzuki, Nagoshi explained, worked without design documents; he was, effectively, making it up as he went along. "He's the kind of person that, if he wants to do more, cannot stop himself," Nagoshi said of his work on *Shenmue*. "Someone must be there to do it for him." Clearly Suzuki has no such calming influence these days. With a release date for *Shenmue III* now set in stone – stop laughing at the back – you might think Suzuki would be trying to avoid distractions. Instead, he's making a VR game.

Vrsus is Suzuki's first arcade project since 2008's Lindbergh-powered *Sega Race TV*, and is being made in partnership with Vres, an ambitious tech start-up with Sega connections (it's being advised by Toshiya Tabata, who used to oversee Sega's coin-op business). Vres' business model is essentially a collection of buzzwords – its company name a portmanteau of virtual reality and esports, its strategy involving a cryptocurrency running on the blockchain – and it's early days, with this one of two projects it took to Tokyo Game Show. As the name implies, *Vrsus* is a 1v1 VR esport that combines elements of CCP's *Sparc*, Ready At Dawn's *Echo Arena*, Switch's *Arms* and your pick of bullet-hell shooters. If that mish-mash sounds like an overly hectic mess then, yes, well done – but far be it from us to question Suzuki's arcade nous. If this means a delay to *Shenmue III*, though, we're going to need to have words.

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My Favourite Game Michelle Zauner

The singer/songwriter known as Japanese Breakfast on making games, soundtracking them, and the divinity of Switch

Michelle Zauner is a musician who writes and performs under the name Japanese Breakfast. With two albums under her belt, she's now turning her talents to videogames, producing the soundtrack for forthcoming indie adventure *Sable*, which was announced on Microsoft's stage at E3 in June.

How did you first get into videogames?
My dad had a Super Nintendo. It was a thing we did together, playing games in our den. I got really into *Secret Of Mana*; it's still one of the only RPGs that's twoplayer, and it was a big part of my relationship with my dad. It took months. After my dad got off work and I got off school, we'd play it for an hour or two. As I grew older and my dad got busier at work, I eventually graduated to a PlayStation and started playing the *Final Fantasy* games. I got really into *FFVIII* when I was in middle school. My cousin in Korea, an older boy, introduced me to the series. I grew up going to Korea every other summer, and it was a big thing to go to arcades with my cousin.

What draws you to RPGs in particular?
It's a great way of storytelling. And I was a big anime fan, so I really loved the art. I also liked strategy guides [laughs]. They had so much more art and information that you didn't get in the game – all the character bios where it shows blood type and stuff like that. I was really into that as a kid. I loved *Chrono Cross*, even though I never played *Chrono Trigger*. You could make certain decisions that would unlock characters, but mean you could never meet others. I liked that element of it.

QUEST LOG
Zauner's *Sable* gig came about in part thanks to a browser RPG made to promote her second album. Brilliantly titled Japanese Breakquest, it was written by Zauner and coded by Schell Games designer Michelle Fath, and riffs on the album's sci-fi themes. *Sable*'s dev team saw an online write-up about the game and got in touch. "They come from different backgrounds – Greg studied architecture, Daniel literature – and were interested in working with people that would have a refreshing perspective on games." Play it at bit.ly/jpbreak.



You're scoring *Sable* at the moment. How do you have to change your process when writing music for games?
I've been writing pop songs ever since I was 16. They have a familiar structure – verses, choruses, repeating parts. Game music doesn't work that way. I've been creating really long, meandering ambient loops, with no lyrics. That's such a huge part of my [writing] process for Japanese Breakfast; it starts with a vocal melody and lyrics, and everything else serves that. Instead of going into a song with a lyric idea and expanding on it, it's like, 'Okay, I'm in a desert. What does that sound like?'

What kind of direction do the developers give you?
In the beginning Greg [Kythreotis, designer] gave me this amazing glossary of landscapes to think about. I have this spreadsheet of different landscapes and keywords, and I just attack one of them for a day. It's fun to play them for my friends, give them that list and say, 'Okay, where do you think you are?' It's a really fun way to write, and they've been really easy to work for.

> "I was a big fan of Harvest Moon – I guess my busy brain enjoys menial tasks like digital farming"

Do you find much time to play games these days, given your busy schedule?
I do actually, because I have a Nintendo Switch, which is God's greatest gift to the touring musician [laughs]. I *love* it. Last year we had tour after tour, and we had two days off before leaving the US for Europe. I'd just bought *Stardew Valley* for PS4, which is another genre I really love. Growing up I was a big fan of *Harvest Moon* – I guess my busy brain enjoys menial tasks like digital farming. I got so into it, and was really sad when I went to Europe: 'Ugh, I'm leaving behind my farm'. My bass player, Devin, had just got a Switch and was playing *Stardew* and I was so jealous. Whenever he was going to sleep on the bus, I'd ask if I could play it. I fell in love. The console is just perfect. It's so *cosy*. As soon as I got back from Europe I got a Switch with *Stardew* and *Breath Of The Wild* – and on our Asia tour, I fell in love with that.

Okay then: what's your all-time favourite?
It just has to be *Secret Of Mana*. The story and music are fantastic, the characters are great, and it's such a special, underrated game. It's the one that's closest to my heart.

Have you played it recently? Does it still hold up?
This is very sad, but all my Super Nintendo games were in my in-laws' attic, and they just, like, fried. My entire childhood, gone. There was a *Secret Of Mana* remake for PS4 that I was so excited about, and I just *hated* it. It was so bad! I thought they were just going to make the art better, but it plays like those old CD-ROMs you had in third grade with learning games on them. It looks like one and plays like it too. It was so horrible. A huge waste of money, and so upsetting. They should have just re-released it as is on a new console. ■

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Zauner isn't worried about whether the *Sable* score is recognisable as her work: "It'd be so annoying to have a Japanese Breakfast song on loop wherever you go"

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS

BOOK
Japansoft: An Oral History
bit.ly/japansoft

Former **Edge** editor – and current **Edge** contributor – Alex Wiltshire is authoring yet another book. Japansoft: An Oral History charts the experiences of developers working at companies such as Sega, Capcom, Enix, Hudson Soft and Nihon Falcom, to name a few. It's a combination of Wiltshire's own interviews, and selections from the extensive transcripts from videogame writer John Szczepaniak's 2013 research trip around Japan. Design agency Julia is on board: illustrations from Yu Nagaba will add anecdotal charm to the book, as will never-before-seen photographs and press adverts. Japansoft: An Oral History promises to be a rare and intimate look into some of the untold stories from Japan's game development history – fingers crossed it reaches its £15,000 funding target.





VIDEO
Getting Into The Game Industry
bit.ly/PMGvid

As People Make Games, former Eurogamer video bod Chris Bratt highlights the human side of videogame development. The unassumingly titled 'Getting Into The Game Industry' tells the story of how Derek landed his dream job. The gorgeous animation is the work of recent full-time hire Anni Sayers, and beautifully envelops you in the story. The second half is weaker thanks to a last-minute change of plans, the interview portion too brief – Bratt has promised more in another video. Still, this is an essential, personal look at an industry crisis.

WEB GAME
I Want To Eat The Sun
bit.ly/eatsungame

Made by Japanese student developer Raw Takahashi (aka Gorillarigo), this is a *Katamari*-esque arcade game in which you must try to make your jaws large enough to swallow the sun in under 60 seconds. It's played with an Xbox controller – you move with the left stick, boost with the left bumper, and clamp your jaws together over increasingly large pellets with the right bumper while avoiding bombs. Goodness gracious, it's satisfying. The quality of the animation makes every snap – produced as your strange koi carp-esque avatar rips its torso in half to surround a target before savagely engulfing it – delicious, pellets bursting like juicy salmon roe filled with points and particle effects. The music is delightful, the premise compulsive, and the execution elegant. We demand a Switch version this instant.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

PERIPHERAL
Cybershoes
bit.ly/cybershoes

Not a joke, apparently. You might look like a berk on buttered rollerskates while using Cybershoes, but they're actually rather effective for getting around in virtual reality. Sit down, strap them on, and the rollers in the soles track the movements of your feet against carpet. According to the Kickstarter page, the reason why Cybershoes help prevent nausea is that when you walk in real life, your head (and inner ear) naturally moves too. "These are exactly the same movements that you perform when using Cybershoes," it claims. One look at any of the hilarious promotional videos is enough to tell you otherwise – nonetheless, the thought of being able to heelie around Whiterun is tempting enough to make us consider taking the optional Cybercarpet seriously, too.



continue

Tap out
A teenage ingenue wins the Tetris World Champs thanks to a tricky technique

Sword play
The results of *Soulcalibur VI*'s character creator make Twitter *slightly* more bearable

Get wet
A new *Marvel's Spider Man* patch adds puddle stickers to photo mode. Fair play

Go bonkers
A new *Breath Of The Wild* 'head stomp' glitch shakes up the speedrun scene

quit

Thumbs down
Review bombing continues on Steam. Well, there are less deserving targets than Lara

Not at vault
Bethesda spins a buggy *Fallout 76* as an opportunity for players to contribute

Freakers flag
Ever the victim of irony, *Days Gone* is delayed again; the world collectively shrugs

Go broke
No *Red Dead 2* stock for US indie shops until November, apparently. Dishonourable





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DISPATCHES CHRISTMAS



Issue 325

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Afterword/rag

Another year, another time for lists. While I must admit a strong compulsion towards them, I recognise their arbitrary nature. That said, on a forum I frequent, I post a thread every year for the worst game of that calendar year.

This year has had me on a different slant, however. I feel I have had to rename the thread to "most disappointing" game due to what seems to have been a very strong year overall. At present, titles like *Mario Tennis Aces* and *State Of Decay 2* seem to be dominating the debate, but it has had me thinking – has this actually been a rather solid year for games overall, or have I been insulated away from the really terrible titles just through my playing of the 'good' stuff? I find it difficult to believe that 2018 has been any worse than any other year, but am straining to find a 'terrible' game. Please prove me wrong.

Martin Hollis

Firstly, it's a little early for all this talk. But in general, you're right. It's hard for a game to be truly *bad* these days, and with so much on offer, you're much less likely to play a stinker.

"Players are not only advancing in age; they have also started to penetrate cultural boundaries"

For beginners

Nathan Brown asks in **E**325: "When was the last time a game grabbed you in the first five minutes, and refused to let you go?". Big-budget games take too long to get going. This column pretty much reflects how I've been feeling about triple-A games for two decades. This is the answer I've always proclaimed.

A game should immediately give the player the option to get involved in states of either paradox or ambiguity. Yes, this is going to get theoretical, but hang in there. It might help to compare it to Csikszentmihalyi's theory on 'flow'.

When it comes to adventure games, paradoxical spheres are where the player is told, by narrative, to do something. At the same time, the player is told, mechanically, that they should not be doing that. In other words: the story says you should do ABC, but the difficulty of enemies and obstacles say you should stop. Overcoming this paradox is the backbone of every game, if not every story. Naturally, this is a tough balancing act for developers: make it too difficult, and players give up. Make it too easy, and players feel like they're doing work.

A good solution to this is by creating an alternative sphere of play for the player to escape to when they feel necessary. A lot of successful adventure games already do this, and we tend to call this the 'open world'. This ambiguity doesn't tell the player what they have to do, but secretly rewards the player for, well, playing. Again there is a dilemma for developers. This can go wrong: if there isn't enough to gain from adventuring in such places, why bother? But this can also go wrong if there is too much to gain from these places: if the rewards of the ambiguous sphere become stronger than the paradoxical sphere, the player will feel like their 'play' has become 'work'.

Classic RPGs often use this formula: going into dungeons will reward you with more story, the best upgrades, and the excitement of seeing if you can overcome epic challenges. Notice how you often cannot save in dungeons: this keeps up suspense. In the outer world, the player can usually save anywhere, try out all kinds of mischievous things, collect XP and gold to improve their chances of success, and improve their understanding of the game's mechanics. Notice how the benefits of both spheres reinforce the benefits of the other sphere: getting better in the open spaces make the determined spaces more doable; the determined spaces make the open spaces feel more playful.

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Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

The opening of *Breath Of The Wild* does this splendidly: it's obvious what you are supposed to do, and that doing so will grant the greatest rewards, but it's also always obvious that there is something to be gained by deviating from the correct path.

Spider-Man does a good job by letting the player immediately swing around NYC, giving an ambiguous sphere to try things out. Unfortunately, besides learning acrobatics, there isn't much to be gained. Perhaps you recall the letdown of encountering the invisible walls: playtime has ended. Once you start the story, you're stuck in the way-too-easy paradoxical sphere, and the game starts to feel like work.

One last example: *Dark Souls'* best moment, in my opinion, is when you find out that following the obvious path leads you to skeletons that will kick your butt. And it's at that moment that the game suddenly leaves you to constantly gauge whether what you are doing is paradoxical or ambiguous.

So there, that's pretty much what I think leads to us either being hooked or bored by a game's content. I didn't say it's easy to design a game correctly according to my theories, but I like to believe that there have been plenty of successful examples. Thanks for reviewing 2017's *Hollow Knight* recently, which I'm currently undertaking. Maybe it didn't grab me within the first five minutes, but it hasn't let me go since I got a feeling of where I should and shouldn't be adventuring.
Robert August de Meijer

Dark Souls is an awkward point of reference, because it doesn't immediately grab you either. Still, we hope the makers of the industry's biggest open worlds are thinking along similar lines. We're getting bored.

Involuntary

All the outrage and misdirection at the "100 hours" stuff is conveniently missing any input from QA staff in the game industry. All over the world, testers are forced or coerced into working 12-hour days, often for months on end, but you won't hear from any of them because they're scared of losing their jobs. I worked for one big developer for over 10 years and the QA were always crunching hard for long periods. In some studios it was common policy to ban holiday outright in August and September. It was heavily implied when I worked there that if you didn't "pull your weight" and do the overtime with everyone else, then you were risking everyone's jobs, letting the team down, jeopardising the release of the game. If you showed any negativity towards crunch, you'd be black marked and not get as good a bonus and definitely have less opportunities to progress.

I worked at another large game studio in the UK where overtime was compulsory. You'd have to have an incredibly good reason not to stay late. We often worked 13-15 hour days, often five days in a row. There will be many HR departments and managers emailing their staff, reminding them of the NDAs they signed and the company social media policy. The Rockstar devs that have spoken about "only doing 50-hour weeks" are only giving one part of the story. QA aren't getting a say. The lowest paid, worst treated part of the workforce will be too scared to say anything. This is an absolute scandal and needs to be investigated properly.
Name withheld

Indeed, it's often the case that those on the bottom floor that feel the most pain, and are the least likely to speak out about it. The industry has changed for the better since the Rockstar Spouse scandal, but if the last few weeks have shown us anything, it's that there's still a long old way to go.

Requiem

After reading in **E**324 about the antiquated views on the worth of playing games espoused on University Challenge, I sighed the same 'change is slow' as you. Still, I would like to offer insight from a recently published academic study that I worked on that should reassure your readers that change is indeed coming.

As a medium, games are not new anymore (as the letters from gaming parents hastily written between child-proofing and football-practice-shuttling attest). Players are not only advancing in age, however; they have also started to penetrate cultural boundaries. At the same time, the seemingly deadlocked academic debate on games' effects on violent behaviour is slowly shifting. Recently, my colleague Julia Kneer launched a survey among general audiences that highlighted a deeper layer of this discourse. Instead of asking if games make us violent – surely by now that dead horse has received enough of a pummelling – she simply asked respondents why they thought other people would play games. This is a different kind of question than asking players why they themselves play. Their motivations lie with managing moods, feeling impactful, or bonding with other players.

From an outsider's perspective this depth is not there. Imagine Paxman's answer to this question and you're just as likely to get 'gamers are lazy' as a vague reference to escapism. The survey's results (which you can find at bit.ly/JustAsked) showed that there are indeed plenty of Paxmen and Paxwomen in the world who see players as wanting to play to commit (virtual) violence. However, it also indicated that those people tended to be older, and that they did not count players among their close friends and family. Family members and friends of players who do not play games themselves were more positive about their loved ones' pursuits, with the motivations they gave closely mirroring those of players.

So, as we ourselves get crinklier, non-players with negative views of games get crinklier still, while we are normalising gaming simply by virtue of continuing to exist. I just wish the loading time for this particular level wasn't quite so long.
Ruud Jacobs

Well put. Your PS Plus sub is on its way, and should keep you busy while we wait for nature to take its course on the dinosaurs. (Is that too morbid? Sorry, deadline does things to us.) ■

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

As I stumble through the first half hour of *Another World: Anniversary Edition*, learning again to kick slugs to death and suffering repeated instadeaths from bad-tempered laser-wielding giant wombats, I feel a powerful nostalgia. Dim memories of playing the original on my little sister's Atari ST; a whole early-1990s gestalt revived. And yet it's not merely nostalgia. The enormous influence of *Another World* can still be felt in modern classics such as *Inside*. And our relationship to the past in videogaming has changed, for the better.

For a start, *Another World* is still spectacularly beautiful: its flat pastels are a testament to the power of thoughtful artistry over mere virtual photography. A terrifying monster is conjured merely by a few red pixels blinking for eyes among a spiky blank expanse of black. A green-screen command-line computer terminal was already a wry retro aesthetic when the game first came out. And the mute storytelling of the minimalist cutscenes still seems more authentically 'cinematic', in a new-wave style, than today's interminable mo-capped expanses of wisecracking murderers and horse-botherers.

The game loads by default with sharpened visuals, and it's with a sigh of relief that you turn them off to experience the exact pixel art of the original. The surprise is that this doesn't make the game feel more old-fashioned; weirdly, the lo-res version seems actually more modern. After all, the 8bit or 16bit graphic aesthetic is now the preferred style for so many new games – and not just micro-budget arthouse experiments – that it no longer reads as exclusively retro. It has become one possible representational mode among many. Perhaps the success of *Minecraft* among the young has primed them to accept blocky graphics as an art style even though they never lived through a time when that was all you could do.

People used to talk about a thing called 'retrogaming', a term I always hated. (If I read a Stendhal novel, I'm not 'retro-reading'; if I listen to a Beethoven quartet I'm not 'retro-listening'.) But what has changed is that retrogaming is no longer a nerdy subculture. It's everywhere. People playing fruit-based smartphone puzzle games on the train are retrogaming, even if they never played the originals. The form has finally matured to the degree that game ideas, as well as art styles, from 20 or 30 years ago can still, in the right hands, feel fresh and contemporary. Hence, of course, the success of Nintendo's Mini SNES – it's cannily marketed as a way for oldsters to relive their 1980s memories, but classics such as *Super Mario World* and *A Link To The Past* make it a totally credible videogames console for fresher-faced consumers in 2018.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

Game ideas from 20 or 30 years ago can still, in the right hands, feel fresh and contemporary

Understandable, then, that Sony should have tried to grab some of this action by announcing the PlayStation Classic. The original PlayStation is only four years younger than *Another World*, but represented a huge leap forward at the time. The trouble comes when we start to consider the relationship between its games and today's. We remember PS1 fondly because it was the first console to reliably run fairly shonky versions of the kinds of 3D games that dominate the market now. Whereas the visuals of *Another World* would still grace any indie platformer today, you couldn't get away with seriously releasing PS1-quality code as a modern game. And so the danger is that PS Classic, unlike SNES Mini, is a machine restricted to retrogaming in the bad, old sense.

And yet, and yet. It has *Tekken 3*, which surely still has legs (and arms) as a hilarious twoplayer punch-up. And, dammit, it comes with *Ridge Racer Type 4*, my favourite racing game of all time, the one with the best soundtrack ever, and as it happens the game I caned all summer while I was writing Trigger Happy in 1999. I know that if I decide to play it I run the risk of ruining those memories. And, unlike with *Another World*, it would make much more sense to do a remaster of *R4* with higher poly counts and framerate, rather than force us to play the original, because the temporal resolution of the PS1 version almost surely does not cut it any more. But it was also the most lovingly art-designed racer of its era, a triumph of sun-drenched electro-jazz ambience. I can't believe that has disappeared.

Hmm, so I seem to have talked myself into a PS Classic after all. Now, for pity's sake, will someone please remake *Cannon Fodder* and *Turrican 2*?

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

The rumour mill is spinning up again. I've never been one for industry gossip, to be honest. Don't get me wrong: if you've got some scuttlebutt about a misbehaving PR rep, I will buy you a drink and you must tell me immediately. But I've spent my time in this profession studiously avoiding too much in the way of rumour. Mostly, to be honest, this is because I am at heart a great big fanboy, and I love to be surprised.

One of the greatest moments of my career was being in the room for the Sony E3 conference a few years back when they showed off *The Last Guardian*, *Shenmue III* and the *FFVII* remake within minutes. Brit journos always feel a bit out of place at these things. There's all this whoopin' and hollerin' and then there's us, pale-skinned and feeling weird in our shorts, griping about the poor air conditioning and barely-there WiFi. We are typically quite hard to impress, like. But when Sony showed that lot off, well, I've never seen anything like it. I was there when the UK magazine press lost its collective shit.

You couldn't take that away from me. Shortly before E3 this year a fellow journalist bragged to me that he knew every single game that was being announced at the show bar three. There's lots to unpack here. First, what a lot of obvious bullshit. Secondly, how did you know there were only three? Thirdly, why on Earth would you do that to yourself – robbing yourself of one of the few remaining rays of sunshine in an increasingly overcast world? New games! Surprising ones!

All of which is to say that I know about as much about PlayStation 5 and Xbox Two, or whatever names you've heard applied to the inevitable new wave of console hardware, as you do (unless you're that guy from the previous paragraph, in which case you probably know loads but it's all wrong). But it seems to be universally acknowledged that it's happening, and reasonably soon. I do not deal in rumours. But I can certainly tell you what I'd like to see from the next batch of boxes to take up residence under our TVs.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

If we get another generation of consoles powered by five-year-old CPUs, I shall simply scream

First, and perhaps most importantly, if we get another generation of consoles powered by five-year-old CPUs, I shall simply scream. Let us never again be suckered in by lofty promises about GPU power or memory; it is the CPU that has held the current generation back from greatness, and if platform holders are left unchecked it will probably do the same next time as well. I like my shinies as much as the next person, and I'm assuming 4K will be the bare minimum the platform holders allow onto their new boxes. But framerates have been left behind throughout this generation, and the work the industry is doing in AI isn't really going to get anywhere if the next generation of console hardware is to be powered by a worse CPU than the one in your mum's phone. If I can't play *Destiny 3* in 60fps on a new £400 console, there's going to be hell to pay.

Next, platform holders, please ensure your new devices are actually able to fully avail themselves of all available bandwidth. As I write this, I am staring at a PSN download that is using barely half what my connection is capable of. Xbox One X is a little better, sure, but glass houses and all that: while we're at it, let's also commit to disc installs taking less than, say, 300 hours.

PS4's Share button was a brilliant innovation back in 2013, but five years later I think we can all agree it is terrible. To this day I'm not entirely sure how to get it to save a clip of the amazing 360 no-scope headshot I just did (and let's be clear, this is the only reason I have no such clips saved to HDD or uploaded anywhere, because I do them all the time). I mostly use it for screenshots, but the delay between press and capture mean that getting the perfect screengrab is a deeply annoying, and usually unsuccessful, guessing game. Switch is the gold standard here; it takes a capture the instant you press the button. It works. Please copy it.

Another biggie is the frontend. You want us to live in your precious console ecosystems, I get it. Could you make them a little more pleasant to actually exist in, please? We game-players are simple folk at heart: all we ask is that when we press a button, something happens, and it feels good. After lashing out £500 on the world's new most powerful console, my first experience with it shouldn't be comparable to that of a £30 Android tablet.

Lastly, and most importantly: I don't want to hear any of this in advance. Leaks are boring, and spoil the fun. In fact, just wake me when it's ready. I'm going back to bed.

Nathan Brown is **Edge**'s *editor. If you've got the skinny on what's being announced at E3, do throw yourself in the bin*

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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

Google has finally announced its brand new game-streaming platform, cunningly titled Project Stream. It's a slick and easy to use implementation of a cool idea: what if anyone who has access to a browser could just press a button and play any game they wanted, anywhere, at any time? But with everyone scrambling to become the 'Netflix of games', Google is about to confront the same problem Netflix already did: it doesn't have any content. More challengingly, unlike Netflix, I don't get the impression that Google particularly wants to make its own games, or even publish them. It needs other studios – ones like ours, in theory – to do it instead.

Over the last few years I've had several meetings with Google's outreach mob, from the early days when its team was mostly people from Sony, to the more polished suits from this year's GDC. Eventually it settled on questions publishers and distributors have been asking devs for years: would you make something exclusively for us? What about a timed exclusive? What about just some exclusive content? A unique weapon? A cool outfit? A hat? What would a hat cost?

This is both an exciting and terrifying question for any game developer (the exclusive bit, I mean; none of us has ever been particularly excited by making hats). Gaining early access to a platform or a peripheral can be a ticket to big sales in a relatively constrained market. But choosing an exclusive platform by definition shrinks your potential audience, and adding any unique features increases costs and, potentially, development time.

Ubisoft has a history of good early bets on new hardware and by getting in early, it has been one of the only thirdparty publishers to make any real money on Nintendo systems. *Red Steel* did surprisingly well by being out on Wii launch day, although the strategy doesn't always work. Ubisoft was an early backer of VR and, well, that's not exactly paid off yet.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> I don't care about what is happening under the hood, I just care that we get the best game possible

Splitting your bets across genres and platforms makes sense for a big publisher, but at Typhoon we have one bet to place, and we don't really have the cash in the bank (yet!) to survive a long period of trying to secure a new project if this one fails. In our world, we need to give ourselves as many opportunities to find an audience as possible: we could certainly support unique features or bonuses for specific platforms, but the idea of exclusivity would essentially require someone to offer so much money that we could survive if we didn't sell any copies at all. And while there have always been a few vanity studios on the payroll of big platform holders, we are not that company.

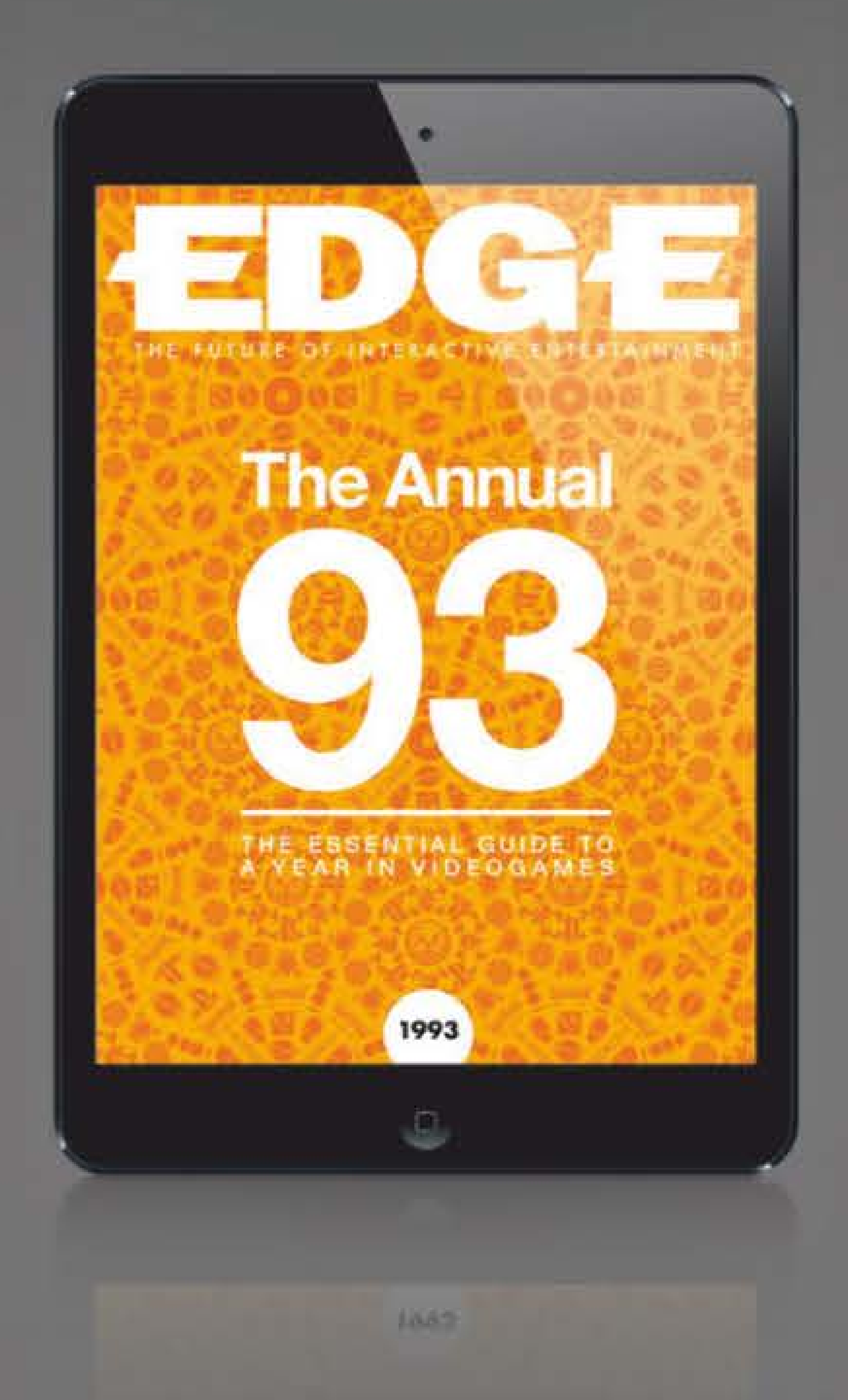
So what should we say to Google? Maybe we could make something unique for Project Stream that would be attractive enough for Google to get you a bit of additional funding, or maybe some marketing on the platform to raise awareness, but more and more it seems like the only sensible strategy for a developer is to remain as platform-agnostic as possible.

Highlighting the potential terror of being tied to a single piece of hardware was Microsoft's immediate trump card when it announced the XCloud service, which sounds exactly the same as Project Stream except with an immediate and vast back catalogue of games. I presume eventually it will have built-in access to the Game Pass library, so it also has a clear and solid business model, which from a consumer perspective is great. That Microsoft and Google have announced their plans so closely together is, however, a concern: any studio who has signed up exclusively with one service or the other could end up backing Betamax instead of VHS and killing their company.

The power we have at Typhoon is that we don't really care which platform is winning the console war, or even if there are any consoles, because we make content, and that will always be the thing that drives excitement amongst players. The hope of a new console is about the kind of games it could power, not the fantasy of statistics and tech demos. And that for me is the unifying element of all these cloud announcements: the obfuscation of platforms and hardware. I don't care about what is happening under the hood, I just care that we get the best game possible, and if we end up with a variety of people offering services that mean players don't need to worry, then players and developers will be the real winners. The more the merrier, then – just so long as we don't have to make too many special hats.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick

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#326

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

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Knowing your place

We've written a lot about the *Yakuza* series in **Edge** over the years. There is much to love about it: its personality, its whimsy, its seediness and human drama. Yet the key to the series' success, and the core of our regard for it, is its stability. Every game in the series has featured the same core cast of characters, deepening our connection to the main players. Crucially, all have also been set in the same corner of Tokyo. You come to know the place like the back of your hand, and each new release feels oddly like a homecoming. This is a rare sensation in videogames – long-running series tend to owe their success to the ways in which they change, rather than how still they stand – and it's all the more powerful for it.

In *Project Judge* (p38), we once again return to Kamurocho, the mocked-up Tokyo red-light district that powers the *Yakuza* games. Yet the latest game from Toshihiro Nagoshi features an all-new protagonist, and a very different set-up; you're not a regretful ex-mobster here, but a lawyer, spurred into action after the death of a loved one. Seeing Kamurocho through fresh eyes is a strange feeling: if a new *Yakuza* is like putting on a favourite pair of slippers, *Project Judge* feels like wearing someone else's. It's an odd sensation that's only possible because we know Kamurocho so well.

Capcom is pulling a similar trick with its lavish, ground-up remake of *Resident Evil 2* (p34). While it's aimed at least in part at players who were too young to play the PS1 game all those years ago, Capcom clearly hopes that crinklier fans will pick up the game too – and is messing with them a bit. Level layouts have been shuffled around, existing rooms rejigged and entire new ones added on, to ensure that even those who know the original game backwards are kept on their toes. Familiarity's a rare thing in a medium with such itchy feet. But on the occasions when we do find it, it inspires little in the way of contempt.

MOST WANTED

Tetris Effect PS4, PSVR
We could have snuck in a review of Tetsuya Mizuguchi's synaesthetic spin on the world's favourite puzzle game this issue, but doing so would have meant rattling through it in 48 hours. The *Rez* and *Lumines* creator's games deserve better, and so do our readers. Next month, we promise.

Katamari Damacy Reroll PC, Switch
We're a little wary of just how well it will handle on those teensy Joy-Con analogue sticks, but we'll make it work. The thought of the game that made Keita Takahashi's career on the commute is simply irresistible. Switch is the best thing ever, isn't it?

Anthem PC, PS4, Xbox One
Our enthusiasm for BioWare's take on the shared-world sci-fi FPS has dimmed slightly given *Destiny 2*'s turnaround, but we're still keen to see what a master of spacebound RPGs can add to the formula. It's unlikely to challenge *Destiny* for feel, but BioWare's considerable talents in other departments mean this is still an intriguing prospect.

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RESIDENT EVIL 2

Capcom brings fresh eyes to one of horror's greatest locales

Developer/publisher	Capcom
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	Japan
Release	January 25

The *Resident Evil 2* of 2019 may have traded static camera angles for an over-the-shoulder view, but it still knows the value of a fixed perspective. As we wander the Raccoon City Police Station in the shoes of a decidedly grimmer Leon Kennedy, we discover a CCTV montage of an officer battling zombies elsewhere in the building, firing his pistol wildly as he backs from one screen to the next. Whether intentional or not, it's a reminder of what the series has sacrificed in handing you control of the camera: the stress of recalculating line of sight to a threat when moving between viewpoints, the paranoia stoked by high-angle shots of cramped environments and of course, the ubiquity of blind spots, with players often forced to shoot at creatures that can only be heard.

"We can still create a feeling of unseen presence through level design," creative director **Kazunori Kadoi** tells us – and, indeed, the remake's binaural soundtrack bubbles with threat, from unearthly shrieks to an ominous dripping, but its handling of the space is very different. It's a question of what your torchbeam misses as you probe newly dark and cluttered interiors, of deceptively still corpses masked by table legs and what might emerge from a crawlspace behind you. It's also a question of how much you recall of the original's maps: Capcom is keen for veterans to find the game much as they left it, but that degree of foreknowledge obviously creates opportunities for treachery. "We want to use your muscle memory to an extent – this is the lobby, these are the side corridors – while also making it fresh," Kadoi says, with faintly sinister emphasis. Backtracking, in particular, is more perilous: as in more recent horror games, recovering a key puzzle item now often sees you running the gauntlet, as zombies jolt to life on the way back to the objective.

Our time with the game turns up shocks and familiar sights in equal measure. The police station's famous lobby still has its imposing goddess statue, but there are now staircases to upper stories which suggest that backtracking will be less arduous. Some rooms are larger while others have been compressed, and new chambers have been grafted onto old corridors. Many of the original routes are now blocked by debris or flooding, and some returning puzzles have been elaborated upon: the statue puzzle in the lobby now requires three medals, for example, two of them hidden away in the wings, which creates more of a back-and-forth between the building's extremities and its heart. The hitherto negligible third floor seems to have been massively expanded, and the basement level now harbours a firing range in addition to the kennels, generator room and morgue.

Many of these changes were made with architectural realism in mind. A Capcom ▶

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The rewritten story again casts you as either Leon Kennedy or Claire Redfield, but fleshes out their relationship with side characters such as Sherry

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career-man who cut his teeth on the first *Resident Evil*, Kadoi argues that today's players are "a lot less forgiving" as regards unlikely or outright impossible spaces. "We could get away with certain, unnaturally designed building layouts in the original games, because it was so novel that you didn't pay attention to the fact that it didn't really make sense," he comments. "There would be corridors that would lead round to a door, and behind the door is just more corridor." The new game's more plausible layouts also, of course, reflect the fact that Capcom has a lot more memory to play with. "[On PS1] you had to have a door right there in order to load in the next area. For the current generation, we're pretty much free of those restraints, so we can design rooms that are as big as we need them to be."

The results are certainly striking – the well-lit bridge where you first encounter the grossly mutated scientist William Birkin has

"We're just giving you enough cues that you can enjoy the gameplay"

become a maze of hissing pipework and terrifying dead-ends – but the emphasis on realism is a little disconcerting. It risks disregarding the unease created by the sheer strangeness of the original's layouts, and if this reflects contemporary player expectations, horror shouldn't be about doing what is expected. Kadoi assures us, however, that the team hasn't taken this ethos too far. "We don't plan on having a layout like an actual office building in the world, because that would be boring. We're still designing a level, not just an architectural space." It's worth remembering that within *Resident Evil*'s story, the police station was once a rather eccentric art museum. In updating it, Capcom is transforming a space that is already a partial mutation of another space, where the mundanity of policework rubs up against ornamental trifle such as trick bookcases. It will be fascinating to see if anything is made of the tension between these incarnations: glimpses of the station's messy third floor suggest that the museum DNA is more prominent here than in the original game.

Capcom is also walking a delicate line in terms of navigational aids, building on the example of *Resident Evil 7*. The remake will make objectives more transparent without, it's hoped, ruining the mood. "We're taking away frustrations without taking away the satisfaction of solving puzzles," Kadoi argues. "If you look on the map and there's a locked door you need to get to, there will be a note somewhere saying, 'I need such and such a key'. But where to find that key, and how to get to it, is still up to you. We're just giving you enough cues that you can enjoy the gameplay, free of the stress of keeping your own notes about what's actually happening."

If the developer has exercised caution as regards the fundamental flow and architecture of *Resident Evil 2*, it has taken a much bolder approach with enemies. The regular zombies compare to those of *Resident Evils 4* through *6* – they're resilient against torso damage but vulnerable to limb or headshots, swaying erratically as they approach to throw off your aim. You probably won't have enough ammo to slay each one, but they are easily stunned and outmanoeuvred. The same can't be said of the eyeless, long-tongued Lickers, who now scale walls as in their original FMV intro, and use boltholes to move between chambers. And then there's the unfortunate William Birkin, who now switches between faster, more aggressive and passive states as he takes damage, and leaps to a higher level when out of view in hopes of ambushing you from above.

The game industry, and Capcom in particular, is prone to repackaging the past – often while cracking down on the efforts of non-copyright holders to preserve old games and properties – and such repackaging can easily become overwriting. Among this remake's great challenges is to ensure that, in updating the 1998 game, it does not retrospectively reduce it to the status of something unfinished, awaiting a team with more resources and insight. Kadoi's talk of being freed from technological limitations teeters on the brink of this thought, but what we've played, thankfully, suggests that the *Resident Evil 2* of 2019 is more of a dialogue than an act of completion, a new perspective on one of horror's most nightmarish spaces. ■



Lick of paint
The newly agile Licker is the poster child for Capcom's efforts to revive *Resident Evil 2* without simply warming it over. In the original game, it's introduced as a wall-crawler but only ever fights you on the ground. "We couldn't implement an actual battle with it scurrying across the walls for technology and time reasons," Kazunori Kadoi recalls. "It would have been too difficult to fight with the stop-and-shoot controls and too difficult to program." Twenty years later, a junior programmer has taken it on himself to finish the job. "Maybe a veteran would never have had that idea," Kadoi observes. "Because in their mind the Licker is what it was. It takes the 'not knowing what you can't do' approach of the younger guys."

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TOP Part of the pleasure of games such as *Resident Evil* is knowing when you're reaching into a trap, but some of the scares here are a little too easy to predict. ABOVE Grim as the ambience is, the game's most oppressive feature remains its limited inventory, though backpack expansions and the ability to swap guns using the D-pad offer some relief





TOP The new perspective means that smaller, fast-moving threats such as zombie dogs are perilously easy to lose track of. Best take them by surprise. ABOVE Grenade launchers are a good antidote to prowling Lickers, but ammo for these is scarce. The crafting system once again lets you manufacture your own shells. LEFT As in the 2002 *Resident Evil* remake, players can use subweapons such as a knife to counter foes and avoid damage when seized. The subweapon is lost in the process

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PROJECT JUDGE

A familiar beat with a different tempo, as Nagoshi returns to Kamurocho

Developer/publisher	Sega (Yakuza Studio)
Format	PS4
Origin	Japan
Release	December 13 (Japan), 2019 (worldwide)

Any successful franchise is a double-edged sword for a developer. Sequels all but guarantee money in the bank, but can be creatively stifling. So it's no great shock to learn that **Toshihiro Nagoshi** has been planning to do something different for a while. "I did aspire to propose a new type of game even during the various *Yakuza* title releases," he admits. And yet there's no denying that Nagoshi's new game isn't a major departure. For the development team, comprised primarily of the main staff behind *Yakuza 0* (which, as that series' peak, is a promising sign), *Project Judge* must seem like something of a busman's holiday.



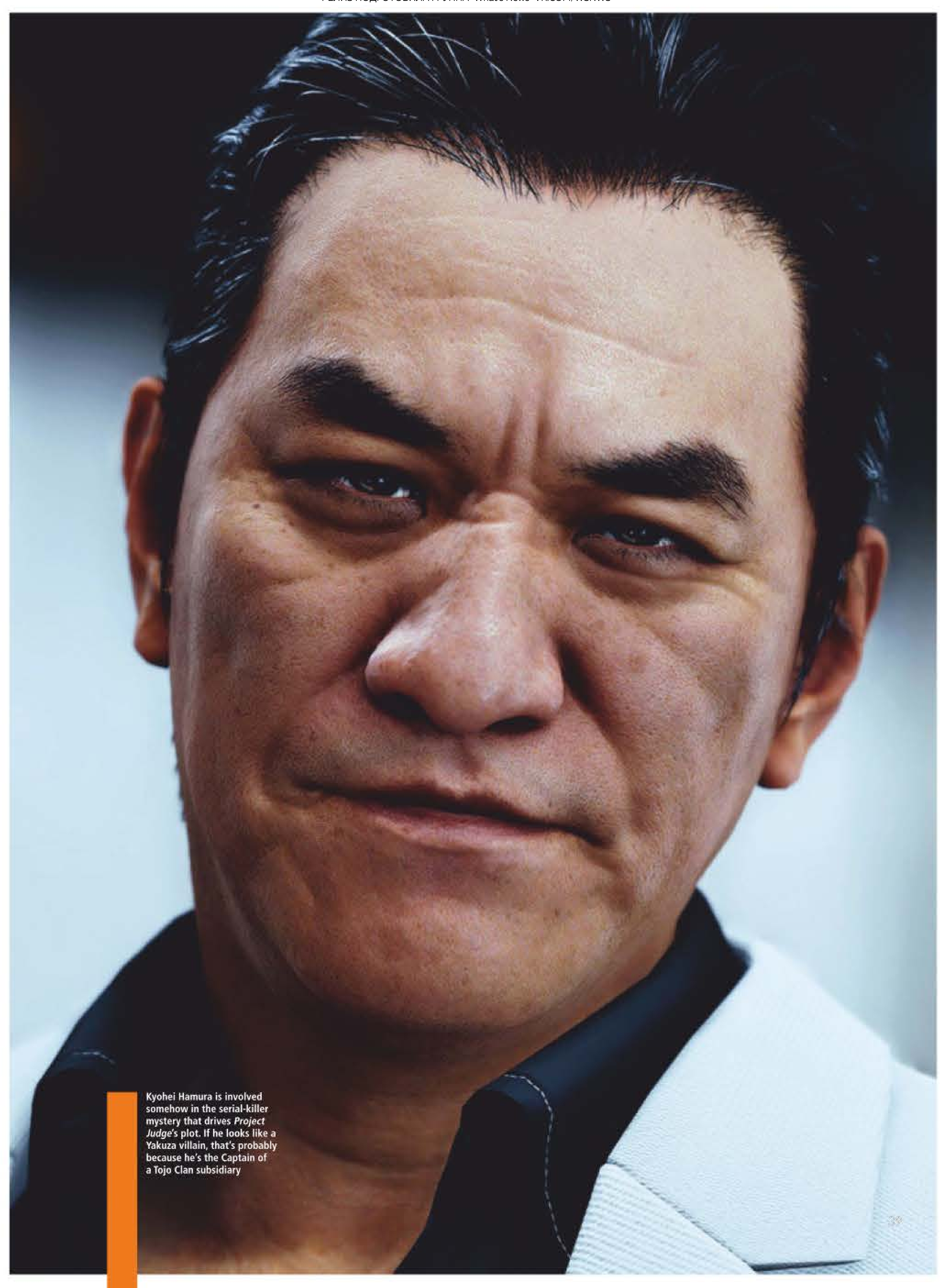
Within seconds of its opening cutscene, we know exactly where we are, as the camera glides down a bustling street, past a Poppo store sign and through the window of a second-floor office. Our first objective, meanwhile, asks us to walk up Nakamichi Street, make a right before Smile Burger, and head down Nakamichi Alley towards Pink Street. The waypoint would be surplus to requirements if we weren't playing in Japanese. The *Yakuza* series' star – no, not Kazuma Kiryu – is back.

Surprisingly, that wasn't the initial plan. "For a time we were considering not using Kamurocho," says Nagoshi. "However, the goal here was to drastically change the game content from the *Yakuza* series, and we wanted to avoid exhausting our budget on a brand-new map. I also felt confident that we could create compelling new gameplay even without a new map."

It's odd to hear Nagoshi talking about budgets when he's been responsible for some of Sega's biggest hits of recent years, but you can probably blame *Binary Domain* – or, more accurately, *Binary Domain*'s sales figures, for the publisher's cautious approach with a game that doesn't bear a recognisable brand name. Besides, it's clear Nagoshi sees the familiar setting as a positive. "You can't help that it's aesthetically very similar to the *Yakuza* series. However, if anything, I think players will be reassured that there will be a strong, dramatic story that they've come to expect from the *Ryu Ga Gotoku* team. Furthermore, the overall feel of the plot and the gameplay is very different from that of *Yakuza*'s."

You could be forgiven for thinking otherwise from those first ten minutes, which involve a brawl between protagonist Takayuki Yagami and a group of braying thugs. He's slightly lighter and faster than Kiryu – his kick-heavy fighting style feels closer to Shun Akiyama in *Yakuza 4*, and his moveset involves kicking off walls to smash opponents in the face. You can switch between two fighting styles via the D-pad, and there are ▶

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Kyohei Hamura is involved somehow in the serial-killer mystery that drives *Project Judge*'s plot. If he looks like a Yakuza villain, that's probably because he's the Captain of a Tojo Clan subsidiary

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Heat moves and finishers besides. If you've played a *Yakuza* game before, the tutorial is barely needed.

That goal is evident when the fight ends, and Yagami finds himself on the trail of a flat-capped suspect, whose likeness has been captured in a remarkably accurate pencil sketch. Outside Kamurocho Asian Beauty Show you'll be asked to identify him from a range of pedestrians. It's a simple process of locking onto them and having a checklist of features confirmed. Once identified, you need to follow them from a safe distance to their destination, an alleyway in the Champion District, in a sequence that plays out like My First Tailing Mission. Glowing blue markers behind signs and cars (and a conveniently-positioned group of salarymen) show you exactly where you need to hide when your target turns around, lest their suspicion meter fill up entirely, resulting in a game over.

It's clear that Project Judge will retain Yakuza's more outlandish elements

It's extremely hard to fail, but the melodramatic music and a few unexpected stops – your target takes a detour to get a can from a vending machine, then pauses briefly for a smoke – keep you amused, while hinting towards more challenging pursuits. The same goes for a QTE-centric chase sequence that follows. Again, it's straightforward stuff, giving you plenty of time to press the appropriate button. But it's fast-paced and heartily silly in the best *Yakuza* tradition: after swerving one group of pedestrians, Yagami grabs another by the shoulder before vaulting over his head.

Despite the seemingly grittier, darker tone of the plot – Yagami's shift from hotshot lawyer to private detective comes after one of his clients brutally murders his girlfriend – it's clear that *Project Judge* will retain *Yakuza*'s more outlandish elements. "It takes a while to get to the ending in this kind of TV-drama-esque action adventure game, so we're conscious of keeping the game interesting the whole way through to avoid the player getting bored," Nagoshi says. "I would argue that those traits aren't solely *Yakuza*, but are an embodiment of Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio's stance on producing entertainment." If you recall a certain scarf-wearing robot and a set-piece involving a toilet visit, Nagoshi's explanation checks out.

Happily, Yagami will get to do some *proper* detective work as the game progresses. Rather than simply following suspects and witnesses, you'll sometimes need to take photos as evidence, fulfilling conditions determined by your client. "For instance, a photo can be evaluated on criteria such as, 'Does it show the location clearly?' or, 'Is it a clear shot of the person's face?'" Nagoshi says. "The photo will be rejected if the basic conditions are not met. On the other hand, if you're able to take clean, close-up shots that satisfy all the requirements, you'll receive bonus experience points." Yagami can also use a drone, controlled via his mobile phone, to take snaps, or surveil suspects when tailing them on foot proves impossible. There's a lock-picking aside about which Nagoshi seems particularly enthused, and secret rooms to locate by decoding clues.

It seems, then, that this is more of a step away from *Yakuza* than first impressions would suggest. Beyond the presence of the ruling gangs – Yagami's partner Kaito is a former yakuza expelled from the Tojo Clan – you shouldn't expect to see many familiar faces. "Of course, some of the team felt strongly about including them," Nagoshi says. "But in the end, we felt that doing so would create misconceptions about the title, so ultimately, we decided to cut them out."

Indeed, while Nagoshi conceived *Yakuza* with an audience of Japanese men in mind, he's confident his latest game will attract more than just the series' biggest fans. "Of course, the protagonist is a male and the game is full of exciting, intense drama, but this title explores the themes of humanity much more than masculinity," he says. "In that sense, I believe this game is tackling a wider spectrum of themes. Regardless of those differences, we as a studio are confident in creating videogame narratives based on human experiences. We hope our fans trust us to deliver on that and enjoy the game." ■



Meet the new boss

When we first see Yagami, he's a cocksure lawyer, all sharp suits and slicked-back hair. Three years on, he's a tousle-haired leather-jacketed private eye. So what drives him? "Well, I don't want to spoil the game, but he has no interest in returning to his career as a lawyer," Nagoshi tells us. "However, he has a powerful sense of justice, and while he doesn't outright say it, he wants to help people." Sounds like someone we know, though as Nagoshi elaborates, he's less sure of himself than Kiryu. "The story starts at a point in his life where he has no strong ideas about what he should or wants to do. This is a bit unusual for a videogame protagonist, but this beginning makes his character arc all the more emotional."

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LEFT **The game uses the Dragon Engine introduced in *Yakuza 6*, though there are no obvious performance improvements. Still, combat feels slightly brisker, if only because Yagami is smaller and nimbler than Kiryu.** BELOW **Chase sequences feel faster and more dynamic than their equivalents in the *Yakuza* games. Yagami can certainly sprint, at least, his leather jacket billowing as he gains on his quarry**





ABOVE ***Project Judge* could well sell us on the idea of tailing missions – if only because of the pleasure of soaking up the sights and sounds of one of our favourite videogame cities.** RIGHT **Yagami is played by Takuya Kimura, a popular film and TV actor in Japan. He's a former boy band member, too, which partly explains Yagami's youthful good looks: he's in his 40s, but could easily pass for someone half that age**



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NOSTOS

An enchanting and ambitious virtual-reality RPG that proves collaboration can be magic

Developer/publisher NetEase
Format PC, Rift, Vive
Origin China
Release 2019

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Our demo takes place within a lush meadow surrounded by forest, but the world of *Nostos* also contains snowy regions and desert climes to explore, each with their own ecosystem and resources to plunder

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TOP **It might be a wobbly version for now, but *Nostos* already features *Breath Of The Wild*-like climbing.** ABOVE **Driving is intuitively designed for VR, but you have to press a button to enter trucks, instead of simply opening the door.** LEFT **Shooting has no real impact. It's jarring to see a gun in such a high-fantasy world, especially when it's quite so limp as this one.** BOTTOM **Our demo ends as the Coralsea storm envelops our small camp, but it seems like you'll be able to fend off destruction by hunting down relics from a bygone age**

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NOSTOS

Even in this early stage – objects popping in and out of view, framerate all over the place – *Nostos* is breathtaking to behold. Blades of grass and lavender flowers dance in the wind; clouds roll overhead like foamy waves over sea-blue sky. It's a scene straight out of a Studio Ghibli film, or plucked from the artbooks of classic JRPGs. As animals roam the fields stretching out before us, there's a flurry of movement over to our right – another human. Their limpid anime eyes stare at us. Then, they wave, before motioning for us to join them.

***Nostos* is an** open-world virtual-reality RPG featuring online multiplayer, a place full of lush forests, dusty deserts and frigid mountainsides to explore. This expansive world comes courtesy of a partnership between Chinese company NetEase and Improbable, creators of SpatialOS. The latter's remarkable cloud-based platform is the key to the instance-based multiplayer, which allows players to hunt, craft, cook and build together. It also lends an edge of reality to the candy-coloured apocalypse of *Nostos*: the world is persistent, and your actions have an effect on its ecosystem. Chop down a tree and it won't grow back unless planted, meaning you have to be careful about how you alter the environment. Get too axe-happy, and you run the risk of creating more desert. Still, we open our inventory and pull out the tool we need, before swinging it repeatedly into the trunk to fell it.

"SpatialOS empowered us to think differently about the design of our game," producer **Shui Ge** says. "Even at that first stage, being able to think about what could be done without having to cut down your design to accommodate the limitations of single-server architecture is quite exciting – you get to throw in wild ideas!" Whereas the social and multiplayer capabilities of many VR games are limited in terms of complexity, SpatialOS can handle it all, and more besides. "We can experiment with ideas like having a human player building a village by instructing AI-controlled allies, and then working with other humans to defend their villages against threats, and see how that experience plays out," Ge says.

The beautiful cel-shaded land of Nostos is under constant threat from a destructive storm known as the Coralsea. "We want players to feel connected to other players of *Nostos*, and to feel encouraged to interact, which means creating incentives for interaction," Ge says. The Coralsea is a remarkably effective one: with the threat of extinction quite literally thundering overhead, we find ourselves keen to get on with our new acquaintance in hopes of staving off disaster. It's a shame we can't communicate beyond vague gestures for now – voice chat or an emote wheel would work wonders. But still, there's something peaceful about silently agreeing to work together with strangers, gathering materials to place down walls, ceilings and stoves. Two people head up a large hill to forage nuts and berries; we split off to help fight and loot a marauding bug boss, before defending our camp from an incoming AI bandit.

> ***"We want to encourage players to interact, which means creating incentives"***

Combat is not *Nostos'* best feature: our opponent just sort of stands there as we whale on them with a clumsy-feeling sword until the in-game model eventually falls over, like a cardboard cutout in the wind. What we're playing is clearly more of a proof of concept than anything, but the concept is strong, a kind of multiplayer interactions-focused *Dragon Quest Builders* in VR. And we sense *Nostos* is more about collaboration than conflict, anyway. "I think the world of game development is getting smaller, but there are definitely still cultural differences in different approaches – not just between China and the West, but between different regions as well. I like these differences," Ge says. "We can definitely learn from each other without losing the elements that give these games character. Western games often focus on a more individual experience, and produce games with very deep characterisation and plots for a singleplayer experience. I believe that Chinese games have really advanced in making different forms of connected play rewarding." ■



Familiar ring

The intimacy of VR is well-suited to the RPG genre, it turns out. "A successful RPG often gives you the sense of closeness to your character," Ge says. *Nostos'* inventory system is an excellent interpretation of this: you access weapons, tools, crafting and building blueprints via a menu wheel situated on the back of your in-game hand. You select a sword or and axe to summon the object, then hang it on your belt once you're done. "Being able to look down at your wrist computer, instead of going to a separate screen, or returning a weapon to your inventory by 'holstering' it – that's a different feeling and it's interesting to play with," Ge says.

It's a very neat bit of design indeed, managing to feel as natural as it looks sci-fi. By the end of the demo, we feel as if we know our inventory like the back of… well, you know.

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HYPE

PROJECT NOVA

CCP's efforts to meaningfully entangle FPS and MMO continue

Developer	CCP Games, Sumo Nottingham
Publisher	CCP Games
Format	PC
Origin	Iceland, UK
Release	TBA

***Nova* runs on Unreal Engine 4 with a performance target of 60 frames per second. Many character and enemy concepts return from *Dust 514*, but each has been totally rebuilt**

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PROJECT NOVA

Dust 514 was a shooter both nourished and suffocated by its link to the cutthroat cosmos of *Eve Online*. Launched in 2013 and shuttered three years later, it tantalised with the prospect of two genres working in tandem within one universe – *Dust* players fighting across *Eve*'s own planets for the glory of *Eve*'s own corporations, while starship captains shelled them from orbit. Sadly, its dreary gunplay paled before the richness of player drama offered by the long-running MMO. While it's starting from stronger foundations, *Dust*'s successor *Project Nova* already looks like it might end up the same way.

CCP has, in fairness, learned a lot from the first game's fate. The shooting still lacks charisma but is a definite step up, closer in terms of pace, handling and map dimensions to *Halo* than *Dust*, with a streamlined class system in place of the previous game's opaque loadout management. While hardly novel, the guns and abilities lend themselves to some passable teamplay strategies: a sniper using her active camo and hover jets to flank a horde, for example, while comrades pop healing auras and build turrets on preset pads near the objective. *Nova*'s aesthetic is just as gloomy and unloveable as *Dust*'s, but the fact that scraps now unfold on starship hulls rather than planets at least makes for some spectacular backdrops, with frigates circling over the carnage like angry seabirds.

All this reflects the studio's belated realisation that an *Eve* shooter can't trade on its *Eve* elements alone – a realisation that saw it enlisting Sumo Digital's new Nottingham studio, made up of Crytek veterans, to develop *Nova*'s core, while moving the old *Dust* team back to CCP's Reykjavik offices to strengthen ties to the MMO. "It has to be fun to kill someone, over and over again," game director **Snorri Árnason** tells us. "It can't rely on other mechanics that are not part of the game to keep it sustainable."

A worthy agenda indeed, but *Nova* doesn't strike us yet as a game that can excel on its own merits, and other developer remarks suggest a lack of confidence in the underpinnings. Árnason observes that *Nova*'s team-based wave survival mode Onslaught might "mirror" the role of asteroid-mining in *Eve Online* – that is, something that is "inherently not really fun", but a relaxing way of grinding out resources. Game director **Steven Clark**, meanwhile, comments a little tellingly that CCP's fans have been hankering for "something they could pick up and play for 15 minutes while they're waiting for something to happen in *Eve*". Is *Nova* an experience in itself, then, or just a way for fans to fill time?

All the hypotheticals will come to nothing if the shooting doesn't captivate

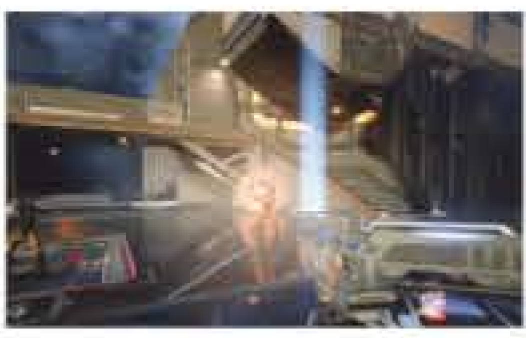
The upshot is that the game's most intriguing element is once again its connection to the MMO that spawned it, which CCP is reluctant to discuss at the time of writing: the developer's hope is to sell players on *Nova*'s shooting, then slowly introduce the *Eve* meta-layer in line with community feedback. The key word, though, is "asymmetrical". Events in each game do not transfer across directly and in realtime, but pass through a 'translation layer' which gives CCP more control over the effects; this also avoids the problem of each game's networking features (such as voice chat) being dependent on the other, which means that CCP won't

The game's default sidearm is a beefy handcannon that shoots explosive rounds, good for the odd multikill. It'll blow you up too if you fire at point-blank range





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ABOVE **The AI's switching between objectives and player-killing can be exciting, but enemies too often behave like creeps in MOBAs – you rarely feel like you're having a one-on-one fight.** MAIN **Among the tougher enemies is this mantis-clawed elite, which can teleport short distances while rushing you. Fortunately, you're endowed with a powerful melee attack.** RIGHT **CCP has *Eve*-sized ambitions for *Nova*'s economy and social aspects – think in-game corporations, espionage elements and custom starbases – but these may take years**

have to take *Nova* offline whenever it performs a major update on *Eve*.

Árnason gives the example of an attack on a starbase in *Eve* triggering a clash across the station's surface in *Nova*, the outcome of which feeds back into the MMO. "The *Eve* owner might get a message that says, 'Your Citadel was sabotaged, your reinforcement timer is now minus two.' That would scare a lot of *Eve* players, because the whole game is about making sure you're defending on your reinforcement timers." The MMO's unique 'time dilation' feature makes tethering its engagements to those of *Nova* difficult, however. For the most part, Árnason feels the best way to achieve symbiosis between games is via their economies: a *Nova* player might harvest black oil, for instance, to flog to *Eve* players via an auction house.

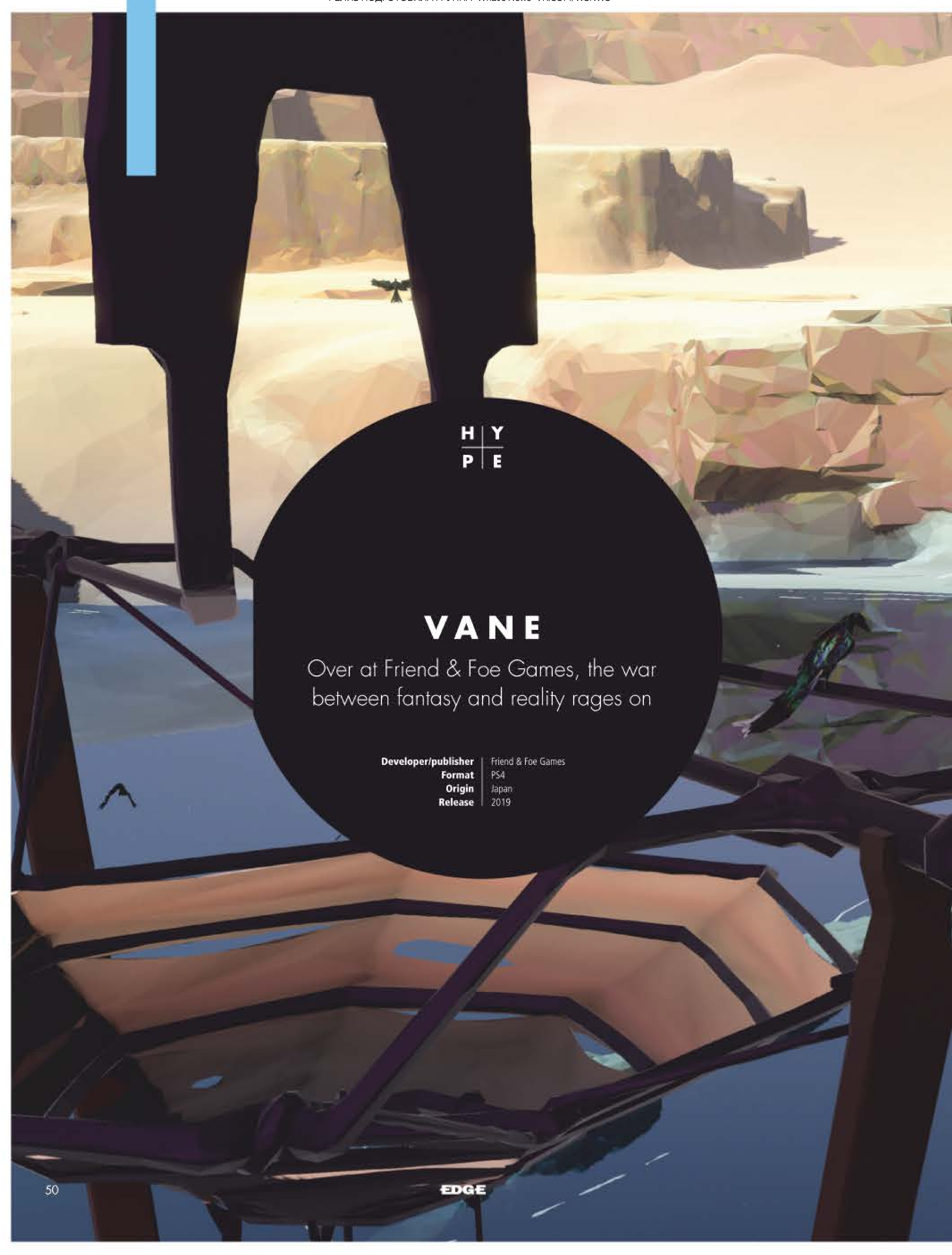
All these hypotheticals will come to nothing, however, if the shooting doesn't captivate. The concept of an FPS fighting its corner within an MMO is still arresting, and *Nova* is very much a game that aims to set wrongs right: CCP's caution about speculating beyond the fundamentals is probably the correct tack to take. But a project with a long tail still needs to make a good first impression, and where *Dust* felt like it might make history, *Nova* seems like history on repeat. ■



Aegis reflector

Nova's story follows on from that of *Dust*, with the latter's elite clone mercenaries resurrected to fight the old Eve faction Samsha's Nation, a rogue religious state. Samsha's Nation hasn't been used as *Eve* content since 2013 – it represents one of many backstory elements CCP might return to through *Nova*. Seemingly told via intermission cutscenes, the game's campaign will introduce a new corporation, Aegis, and may ultimately take players back to *Eve* planets, though this is strictly a possibility for after launch. While there's little in-game storytelling, matches also follow a *Titanfall*-esque narrative structure, with players contesting points and holding them for a period before rushing to an exfiltration point.

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VANE

Over at Friend & Foe Games, the war between fantasy and reality rages on

Developer/publisher	Friend & Foe Games
Format	PS4
Origin	Japan
Release	2019

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The perching mechanic has markedly improved over the past year. It now feels more a matter of skill and timing than sheer luck, and particular perching spots are more clearly indicated, too

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There's an unreality to *Vane* that makes it mesmerising. It's been a year since we last played Friend & Foe's winged adventure, and it's lost none of its bleakly beautiful sense of mystery since. Before, we explored a vast, bleached desert, and got rather lost in the process. This time, we're in a dark crevasse littered with mechanical bones, and our goal is clearer: to realign the broken rail in the centre of the room. Our objective may be more mundane, the signs pointing to it clearer, but completing it is still wonderfully strange: we leap into a chasm, transforming effortlessly into a bird in the freefall, and set about our task.

Much of the past year of development has been about reconciling *Vane*'s abstract, enigmatic spirit with the practicalities of a videogame. "I think at the beginning we weren't quite sure what kind of game we were going to make," producer **Matt Smith** says. "We knew what kind of experience we wanted, but we weren't really sure what *form* that game was going to take. And the process of pulling a game out of that feeling has been challenging – more challenging than we would have expected." *Vane* is not their first feathered rodeo: this is a dev outfit comprising several ex-members of *The Last Guardian* team. But the process has proved remarkably different. "None of us had really owned a project like this before, and didn't really realise how much of your own soul you put into it," director **Ivar Dahlberg** says. "When you're working for someone else, making someone else's game, you don't care as much. But suddenly you have this thing, and everything is very, very important to you."

Foremost is that chimeric atmosphere – the shivering, shapeshifting nature of *Vane*'s world and characters. "If anything, the stuff we've done in the last year is even weirder," Smith says. Parts of the craggy chasm seem



Scenes with more linear puzzles can still play out differently. We head towards optional objectives first, freeing birds from cages, on a second playthrough

The more open-ended desert scene is still a standout, as are tightly choroeographed storm sequences scored with devastating synth music



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LEFT *Vane* will be about "how your relationship with this catalyst, the golden material, kind of changes and carries the gameplay," Deguchi says. A quick peek at another level has us pushing a gigantic ball of the stuff with other bird-girls

to pulse in response to the game's synthy soundtrack. When we need to push a counterweight from a cliff, we dive into holographic pools of gold to turn from bird to girl: seeing a fellow bird trapped in a cage, we plunge into the crevasse to reverse the change, before landing on a perch above and calling over the flock to help us dislodge the prison. But there's something else new, and not entirely welcome: button prompts that tell us how to call out as the bird, or grab an object as the girl.

> *"Suddenly you have this thing, and everything is very, very important to you"*

These prompts, alongside a more explicit visual narrative to the puzzle we're trying to solve, are part of what makes this demo of *Vane* so much clearer than the last. But it's a compromise, and continues to be a source of much deliberation for a team concerned with subtlety. "Prompts are something we're still testing out," environment artist and art director **Rasmus Deguchi** says. "Our intention is for it to be less intrusive than it currently is, and to hopefully also offer you a choice to turn them off, or make them less in your face." With release finally nearing after many years of iteration, pragmatism and prioritisation has played a larger role in development this year. "Ultimately, we're kind of down in the crucible now," Smith says. "This is a battle, and you can die on this hill. And I would prefer we didn't die on this particular hill – I think there are more important ones to die on.

"The thing we're most scared of is the player not owning their discoveries," he continues. "Getting to some place and feeling like they were led there by a leash, as opposed to feeling like they discovered it." But when we complete the puzzle and progress into the next room, we feel as though we've stumbled across something unspeakable, the hairs on the back of our neck prickling. Around a central structure hang several cages, each containing a distressed bird. We pull at handles to release them, and they drop into golden puzzles below, transforming into our sisters. It's straight out of a Grimm fairytale: a magical, faintly disturbing scene. "What we noticed is we needed to be more explicit in driving the narrative forward," Dahlberg says. "Not necessarily explicit with what everything means or how it works, but just making sure that we're keeping that momentum and not letting players get lost." With a more game-like structure supporting it, we finally see a realistic future in which a larger subset of players will be able to experience and appreciate *Vane*'s stranger stylistic workings. "We have allowed ourselves specifically this last year to make wider turns in what we bring into this world," Dahlberg says, "and make it a little bit more special, more fantastical." ■

Smith on *Vane*'s unusual structure: "The structure of the game we were talking about last year is still basically there," he says. "Your relationship with time is unreliable, it's just we may not communicate it as spectacularly as we'd hoped"





Rags to riches

Over the past year, *Vane*'s heroine has transformed in yet another sense: once a scruffy urchin, she's now almost regal, clad in flowing ribbons reminiscent of *Journey*'s travellers. "We had certain emotions that we wanted to portray," Dahlberg says. "We were not really happy with how the previous one was hitting those, so we revised it. And we also incorporated some colour, which really helps in our darker environments." Deguchi laughs: "It's still mostly black on black, but we added some blue!" Even the bird form appears to sparkle more, we note, and the aesthetic feels more whimsical. "When we first had it on paper, I imagine if you saw the script you would have been like, 'This is very much a fairytale'," Smith says. "And now the whole game has sort of come together, that nature is just a little bit more apparent."

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Developer/publisher Polyamorous Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Poland
Release 2020



PARADISE LOST

A story of child's play after the fall of civilisation

Paradise Lost is about loss at both the "micro and macro scale", according to Polyamorous CEO and game director **Greg Ciach**. Set in a frozen, post-apocalyptic Poland, it explores civilisation's aftermath through the eyes of two characters: a nameless boy combing the wilds for his mother, and a woman, Eve, who resides deep in an enormous, decrepit underground bunker. Eschewing combat and time-sensitive mechanics in general, it sees you manipulating objects using kinaesthetic gestures inspired by Frictional and Quantic Dream's work – rotating the cursor across to crank a handle, for example. The first thing we do in our demo is tend to a poppy, adjusting a heating lamp and pumping water through a hose. The sequence takes place in the boy's initial refuge, a smaller bunker shared with his mother, who communicates with you over an old radio as she scours the countryside for spare parts.

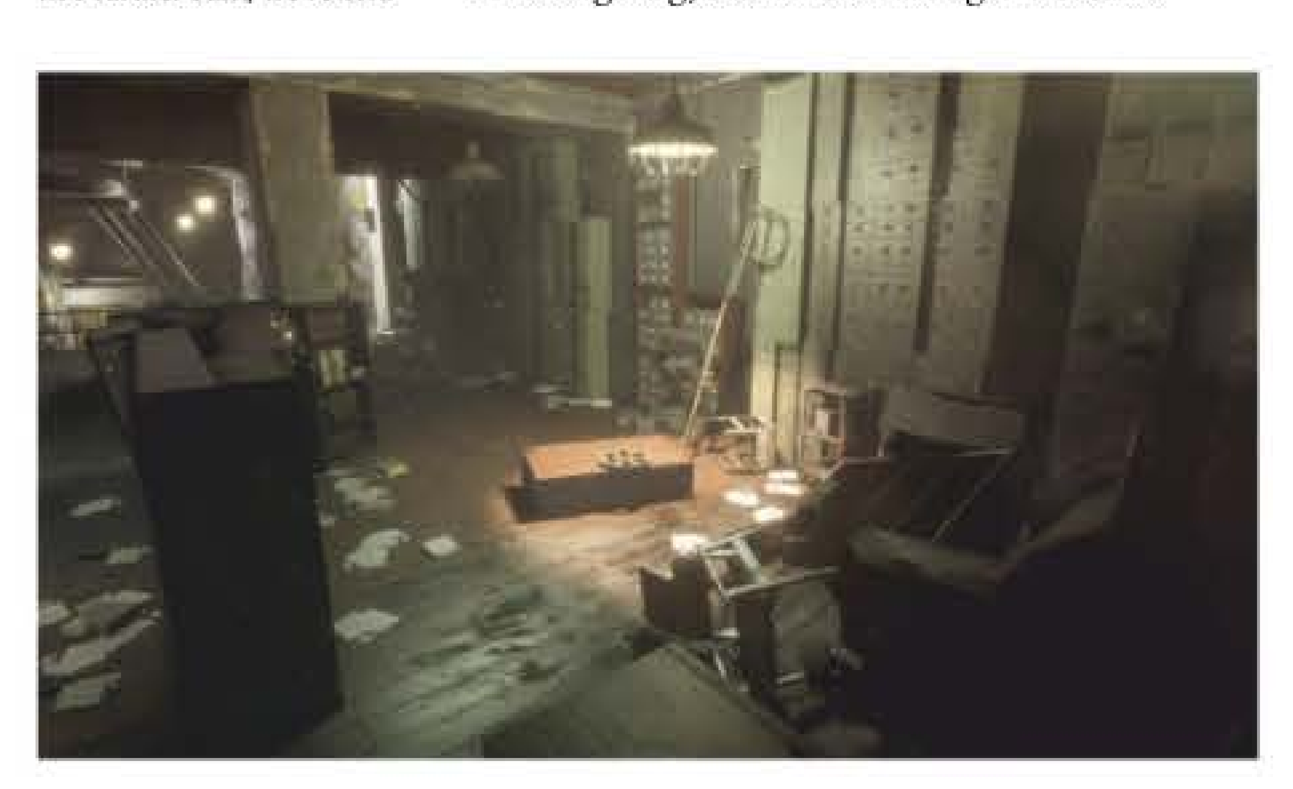
It's an intensely storied space, one that – unlike, say, the decadent junkyards of *Fallout* or *Bioshock* – gives the sense of lives ongoing, even flourishing. There are meticulous drawings of flowers tacked to a boiler, Persian rugs thrown haphazardly across one another and a child's alphabet in chalk over narrow beds. There is a coffeepot on a hob. As in *Gone Home*, the location has a magic realist bent, finely balanced between domestic nuance and fantasy: at one point, we flip the buttons on a slide projector to review a Slavic fairytale that soon proves to have a real-life import. Unlike in *Gone Home*, there is a strong element of danger. An electrical fault starts a fire just as we lose contact with our character's mother. After extinguishing it – a simple sequence-based puzzle – we don breathing mask and gloves and set out in search of her.

> ***"Depending on your choices you'll create an information bubble for yourself"***

Paradise Lost's narrative unfolds in two timeframes. At preset intervals you'll be able to switch to the perspective of Eve, whose story occurs in the past and shapes the environment and events experienced by the boy. "It's intertwined, not chapter by chapter or full playthrough by playthrough," Ciach says. "Everything is mixed up and kind of chaotic at times, but in a good way." The personal struggles of these characters frame, and are framed by, a grander ideological conflict between science and mysticism. The bunker in which most of *Paradise Lost* takes place was once home to two brothers with different ideas about how to rebuild the world; ideas made tangible by art direction that blends pagan motifs with "typical, Western, post-Nazi" aesthetics and retrofuturism.



Polyamorous has yet to sign a publisher, but is in talks with a couple of companies. It is looking to hire four or five further staff, we're told



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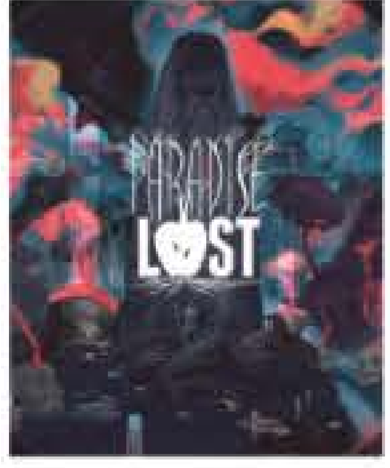




ABOVE **There's a touch of *What Remains Of Edith Finch* to the game's interest in luxurious media artefacts that blur the line between real and imaginary spaces.**
TOP LEFT ***Paradise Lost*'s controls are a bit halting currently – you click objects, then drag the cursor inside a circle to manipulate them – but there's plenty of time for improvement.**
TOP RIGHT **The game is indeed directly inspired by John Milton's poem Paradise Lost – the fraternal struggle at the heart of its story owes a lot to the character of Satan**

"On the one hand you have somebody who wants to create a police state inside the bunker, and they're very science-oriented," Ciach says. "And on the other hand you have this free thinker who believes that Slavic religion is the key to everything. Those people are constantly clashing and their followers are clashing – you can really read deep into it, and depending on your choices you're going to create an information bubble for yourself. You can have a completely different view of those characters depending on those choices." The brothers themselves are present in "retrospective ways", but it sounds like players will never engage with them directly.

And then there's the theme of grief, which also supplies *Paradise Lost* with a narrative backbone. "We've read a lot about the Kubler-Ross model," Ciach says, "and how most of us are going through those five stages [of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance] when we grieve. We have our own people inside the game who went through those stages at different points in their lives." If this risks giving away too much in advance, it's a powerful premise for a game that regards the end of the world as an opportunity for reflection, not bloodshed or plunder; a post-apocalypse that engages with its own sorrow rather than merely carrying on the conflict. ■



Crossing lines

The recipient of an Unreal dev grant, Polyamorous Games numbers just 14 people. Among its more seasoned staffers is art director Riana Moller, who cut her teeth at Io Interactive and went on to work on Crytek's *Ryse: Son Of Rome*. The developer aims to "blur the line between art and entertainment", and is keen that its work be accessible to people who don't play games habitually – hence, *Paradise Lost*'s use of gestures that are easy to perform and (supposedly) less artificial than pushing buttons. "We loved them in *Amnesia*, *Penumbra* and *Soma*," Greg Ciach says. "It gives you a feeling of great immersion when you do what your characters are doing."

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ROUNDUP

JUST CAUSE 4

Developer Avalanche Studios **Publisher** Square Enix **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Sweden **Release** December 4



The hype train has barely left the station for Avalanche's latest celebration of physically based open-world explosions. That's understandable, perhaps, given publisher Square Enix's busy release slate – plastering Lara Croft's fizzog on London buses and fizzy-drink bottles doesn't come cheap or easy, and in retrospect those resources were probably better spent elsewhere. Details are still weirdly scant, but this already looks great. A recent marketing beat focused on the story, arguably the least important part of the game. We just want to make Catherine wheels out of shipping containers, and fire RPG rounds into tornadoes.

OBSERVATION

Developer No Code **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Format** PC, PS4 **Origin** UK **Release** 2019



The next game from No Code, the Glasgow-based developer of subversive 2017 narrative adventure *Stories Untold*, tasks you with finding out what happened to spacebound Dr Emma Fisher and her crew. So far, so familiar, but there's a twist: you control a space station AI. Using the ship's camera, security systems and other assorted tools, you'll piece together the crew's fate – as well as, inevitably, learning about the AI's true role in proceedings. One to watch.

KINE

Developer/publisher Gwen Frey **Format** PC
Origin US **Release** TBA



Animator Gwen Frey quit her job to work on *Kine* full-time, and we can already see why. It tells of a band of robots which dream of being musicians, which is right up there as concepts for physics-y platformers go. The machines must extend, rotate, join together and split apart to navigate 3D puzzle-boxes. We hope the trailer's frantic jazz makes the final cut.

SKIN DEEP

Developer/publisher Blendo Games **Format** PC
Origin US **Release** TBA



An FAQ for Brendon Chung's follow-up to long-in-the-making hacking game *Quadrilateral Cowboy* asks if it, too, will take four years to make. "I hope not," Chung says. This certainly seems a leaner thing, and a more fun one too, an 'immersive FPS' where glass gets stuck in your feet, and dusty vents make you sneeze, blowing your cover. Already essential.

OVERRIDE: MECH CITY BRAWL

Developer The Balance Inc **Publisher** Modus Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Brazil **Release** December 4



Yes, this is about big stompy robots duffing each other up. The hook here is in the control system, which maps each limb to a different input; the twist comes online. In addition to campaign co-op and solo and teamplay versus modes, pals can party up in a single mech, and control a limb each.

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GAMES RESEARCH *at* FALMOUTH UNIVERSITY

Students at the Games Academy at Falmouth University work in teams that mirror real studios and work on projects collaboratively across courses, meaning they get an incredible insight into the games industry while they study. For one student, this multi-disciplinary working lead to the opportunity to present her cutting-edge research project at the Foundations of Digital Games Conference 2018 in Malmö, Sweden



Maddie Kay, who graduated with a BSc(Hons) in Computing for Games last year, developed an interest in game AI and its effect on player behaviour during her studies. She focused her dissertation on visualising AI pathfinding, determining whether players explored a specific level differently once an enemy NPCs route can be seen.

Maddie worked with a student team from the Game Development BA(Hons) called Bears are O.P, on a first person Metroidvania game entitled Gates of Amenti. It served as a final year project for the Game Development students and simultaneously an AI testbed for Maddie's research.

Maddie explained: "I was the AI programmer for Gates of Amenti and I worked on the non-boss enemies, collecting the data for my research by observing their behaviour and the impact on player exploration. It was amazing to work in a team where everyone was so passionate and committed to developing our game."

Gates of Amenti was produced from scratch, with Bears Are O.P utilising the diverse range of facilities at Falmouth University, catering to each of their specific disciplines. The artists had access to high-end drawing tables, the audio producers had state-of-the-art sound equipment at their disposal and the programmers used the industry leading game engine software Unity to craft the game itself.

After Maddie had completed her research, she submitted her final paper to the FDG conference for academic review and was then selected to discuss her findings and their impact in front of the assembled scholars, game developers and other computing professionals at the event.

Maddie reflected: "It was an incredible experience to present my work and very interesting to see the variety and level of research occurring within the industry. It was a fantastic opportunity and studying at Falmouth surrounded by world-class researchers, such as those in the MetaMakers Institute, really inspired me to go for it!"





You can find out more about the Games Academy by visiting www.falmouth.ac.uk



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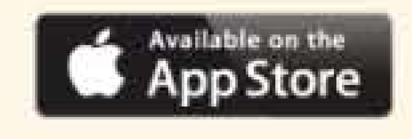
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THE ART OF FIGHTING

Capcom takes stylish action to dizzying heights in Dante's most spectacular game to date

By Nathan Brown

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The hit pause is one of videogaming's greatest tricks. A brief, almost imperceptible freeze in the action when a blow hits home, it may have been invented primarily to help fighting-game players react to the hit and continue their combos, but its real magic is in the way it emphasises the impact of a successful attack. *Devil May Cry 5* is full of them, naturally; this is a Capcom game of supremely fast, impeccably stylish action. Yet here it feels celebratory, reverential even, pulling

THERE ARE MOMENTS WHERE DEVIL MAY CRY 5 FEELS LIKE A KIND OF CAPCOM UBER-GAME

in references from the wider Capcom universe and delivering them with, in the context of its publisher, an unprecedented visual sheen. Dante, *Devil May Cry*'s headline protagonist, has here been blessed with a Shoryuken. Its animation has three obvious, lengthy and quite beautiful hit pauses. Bang, oof, pow. Magic.

As if the *Street Fighter* reference wasn't clear enough, the weapon Dante uses to perform the iconic move is called Balrog. It has two modes, one a peek-a-boo boxing style that recalls not only Capcom's famous boxer, but in its rapid bobs, weaves and jabs, the sadly overlooked *God Hand*. The other, focused more on kicks, has its roots in capoeira, but it equally calls to mind *Street Fighter V*'s Ken. There are moments where *Devil May Cry 5* feels like a kind of Capcom uber-game, a collation and celebration of some of its finest work delivered in dazzling style. Director **Hideaki Itsuno** acknowledges the references, then downplays them, and then acknowledges them again: "The Balrog is absolutely a *Street Fighter* reference, but the moves themselves weren't really inspired by our other games. Though our intent was very much to say, 'Alright, let's see if we can make a boxing fighting style that looks cooler, and more stylish, than any other boxing style Capcom has made'. We were trying to one-up the rest of the Capcom teams in that respect, for sure." Bang, oof, pow. Job done.



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Game *Devil May Cry 5*
Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release March 8

While *Devil May Cry*'s ranged weaponry – in particular Dante's twin handguns, Ebony and Ivory – are iconic, they play a supporting role in a game that's more defined by up-close combat. You'll use them to keep a combo meter going while you close space on a faraway foe – though that can now be done on a motorbike

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Itsuno's return to *Devil May Cry* has been a long time coming. Too long, if you ask the small, but tediously vocal, subset of *DMC*'s fanbase that took such umbrage at the series' previous instalment, 2013's *DmC: Devil May Cry*. Developed by UK studio Ninja Theory and powered by a needlessly controversial visual redesign of Dante, it was overseen from Japan by Itsuno. Without it, *Devil May Cry 5* would likely look very different. Itsuno took frequent trips to the UK during the game's development, and has fond memories of its fish and chips (and less fond ones of its immigration queues, since one of his visits coincided with the London Olympics). "I really fell in love with it," he tells us. "You have all these amazing elements in the architecture; it's modern, but it's gothic. You'll have this great gothic architecture, and on the first floor there's a McDonald's. I thought that was so cool, this amazing juxtaposition, and I thought it would be a great place for a *Devil May Cry* game." When the time came to scout locations for *DMC5*, Itsuno sent a squad to the UK – to London primarily, but also further afield, to castles and cathedrals around the Home Counties.

The result of that endeavour, Red Grave City, looks a little familiar, the series-standard looming gothic towers surrounded by pillar boxes, street-signs and level furniture captured on research trips and implemented to give the place a distinctly London flavour – albeit one that has been overrun by demons and an evil tree that's smashing through its glorious architecture and drinking the citizens' blood. Nothing worse than what you'll find on the District Line at rush hour, perhaps, but while Red Grave is clearly modelled on London, it's also obviously a work of fiction. "We set the game in a fictional city, but we use references so we can hopefully recreate the feeling of a place," producer **Matt Walker** says. "We don't want to copy anything that exists in the real world, because that would be, well, copyright infringement [laughs]. But we want it to be something people can relate to."

WHATEVER THE INSPIRATION, RED GRAVE CITY LOOKS SUMPTUOUS

Whatever the inspiration, Red Grave City looks sumptuous, and even before the steel starts flying it's clear this is one of the prettiest games Capcom has yet produced. Character work has come on leaps and bounds, with a far more realistic look to the central cast (a Hype in **E**324 featured an uncaptioned portrait of new NPC ally Nico; one reader got in touch to ask why we hadn't named the girl in the picture, assuming her to be part of the dev team). Hair and clothing flaps realistically in accordance with character movements. And once the action starts and the alpha effects kick in, it is simply something else. This is new territory for *Devil May Cry*, which has always had a b-movie aesthetic to it, a certain grubbiness entirely in keeping with its blood-splattered, metal-soundtracked demonic grime. The claret is still there, of course. The music, too (Devil Trigger, the typically ludicrous theme for *DMC5*'s announcement trailer, hit number one on the iTunes rock chart during E3). But it has never looked quite like this.

That's all thanks to the RE Engine, Capcom's internal tech that was built to power *Resident Evil VII* but which on this evidence is far more versatile than its name suggests. Well, it is now Itsuno and team have made a game with it. "The engine was originally made for *Resident Evil*, and it didn't have all the functionality we needed to make *Devil May Cry 5*," Itsuno says. "But that actually played to our benefit. We had just the essentials: a limited set of functions that we needed in order to get started. Because of that, we were able to build out the game in such a way that it didn't have a lot of fluff; it would be a nice lean engine that had specifically what we needed."

"It's Capcom's first time implementing a proper, physically based rendering pipeline for a product," Walker adds. "But we did add other stuff. The reason the facial animation looks so good is we implemented blend shapes, which a lot of the best triple-A developers have been using for a long time. But we didn't have them in MT Framework, and we didn't have them in RE Engine until *Devil May Cry 5* came along. We spoke to the engineers, told them what we needed, and worked with them to get that up and running. We did, and it's become a new tool for the engine."

This push for realism is not without its problems, however. This, lest we forget, is a game in which you can swing a sword with such force that it throws the enemy into the air for some gravity-defying aerial combat. It is a game where you fight your way through an increasingly bizarre, gruesome, and enormous set of demons. It is a work of arch fantasy, in other words, and when reality intrudes, things can get complicated. Itsuno recalls working on *Devil May Cry 4*, which released in early 2008 and was, the development team felt, a realistic-looking game. "But you look back at it now and it kind of looks like anime. Now we've moved forward, and we've made it as realistic as we can, but ▶

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For the real magic to happen with the Balrog equipped, you must first power it up by landing a quick succession of attacks. Only then can you unleash the weapon's power

TALES FROM THE CRYPT

The story picks up a few years after the events of *Devil May Cry 4*, by which point Nero has set up his own demon-hunting Devil May Cry business. It operates out of the back of a transit van ("The DMC Motorhome, as we've been calling it," *DMC5* producer Matt Walker says) which has handy gameplay connotations: NPC ally Nico will drive up and allow Nero to tinker with his loadout at certain points in the levels. While our Nero demo riffs heavily on Norse mythology through nods to Niddhog and Yggdrasil, the game will as ever draw upon a plethora of sources for its bestiary, though The Divine Comedy remains the central touchstone. While *DMC4* insisted players use Nero for more than half the game before Dante showed up, here the central cast assembles much more quickly. In some missions, you'll have no choice over which character to use, but in others you'll be able to choose between two of them, or all three. Multiplayer functionality, seemingly revealed in a PlayStation Store listing, has yet to be officially confirmed.

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Nero may not quite match Dante for raw flexibility, but the selection of Devil Breakers on offer mean he will certainly be more varied in the hands than he was in *Devil May Cry 4*

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we realised that a lot of the game-y stuff we've done before doesn't translate well to this new look."

Animation was a particularly difficult thing to get right, with the tricks and techniques previously thought as genre standards proving no longer fit for purpose. How do you deal with cancels, for example – where one animation stops and is overwritten by another when the player hits a different button – when your character looks real, and therefore needs to move as such? And how do you respond to that problem without spoiling the responsive feel of the controls that fans of this genre demand?

"We used to procedurally interpolate between two animations, so it would come off pretty smoothly," Itsuno says. "But we found that with such realistic graphics, the procedural stuff only works in certain instances. There were a lot of cases where we couldn't interpolate like that and have it look natural, so we had to go in and create, by hand, new animations to insert in between them. They're not that long, maybe just a frame or two, but they let us create something that feels as responsive as a Capcom game should, but still looks natural in this context. That's something we're really proud of."

DEVIL MAY CRY IS NOT A DIFFICULT GAME TO PLAY; IT IS SIMPLY A DIFFICULT ONE TO BE BRILLIANT AT

If things have had to change under the hood, we certainly don't notice during a lengthy hands-on session, comprising multiple playthroughs of the demos Capcom took to Gamescom and Tokyo Game Show. This is, for all the technical tweaks and graphical splendour, still *Devil May Cry*. That's most obvious when we play as Dante – no surprise, since he's the series' only constant. This is Itsuno's Dante, meaning he has access to four distinct styles, switchable on the fly using the D-pad, and a host of melee and ranged weapons, which can also be changed in realtime with a tap of either trigger. Despite the complexity, the controls themselves are reasonably straightforward, with the movelist requiring little more than slightly different timing, or a directional modifier on the analogue stick. Timing windows are generous, too. *Devil May Cry* is not a difficult game to play; it is simply a difficult one to be brilliant at, and that is the heart of its appeal. ▶

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1 Dante's semiautomatic pistols, Ebony & Ivory.
2 His deliciously absurd new weapon, Cavaliere, is a motorbike with chainsaws.
3 A selection of Nero's Devil Breakers: Overture, Buster Arm and Gerbera.
4 Devil Breaker specials are simple to perform: just hold down an attack button.
5 Dante's sword, Rebellion, has been by his side since the first *Devil May Cry*.
6 Nero's gun, the Blue Rose, has been altered: it's no longer semi-auto as in *DMC4*, but instead fires one round per trigger pull

SKATE THE LINE

Itsuno's acknowledgement of the fine line between crazy and ridiculous when it comes to *Devil May Cry*'s combat invites an obvious question. If a bisected motorbike is deemed acceptable, just how daft does something have to be to be consigned to the cutting-room floor? Abandoned concepts include a weapon Dante could figure-skate with ("All the ideas we've had were too ridiculous, though that isn't to say we won't find a way of implementing it somewhere down the line") and one modelled on the ribbons used in rhythmic gymnastics. Itsuno has long wanted to build on the Nevan, a guitar-like weapon Dante used in *DMC3*. "It's so hard to do in a cool way." A character in Itsuno's fighting game *Rival Schools* was a violinist, so there's certainly precedent – though his dream of a saxophone weapon seems impossible in a game set to wailing metal. "If anyone's got any ideas," he says, "please let me know on Twitter."





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That's not to say we don't struggle. The TGS build, where Dante was playable for the first time, supports save data, and a Capcom UK community manager has been busy in the weeks since Japan's biggest videogame show. Dante has access to half a dozen melee weapons here, and if we're honest, it's a little overwhelming at times – especially when an intended tap of a shoulder button to lock on or modify an attack comes out as a trigger press, switching our weapon. Some have multiple modes, too (the Balrog's punch or kick mode is selected with a button combination). It won't be this way in the final game: as before, Dante will start out with a couple of weapons, and unlock more as he progresses through the story. But it does mean that we spend much of our demo feeling a little clumsier than we – or Dante, you suspect – might like.

THE PICK OF THE BIGGER WEAPONS SEES DANTE FIGHT WITH HALF A MOTORCYCLE ON EACH FIST

4

This is the point of Dante, however. While he has ranged options, he does his best work up close, and rapid switching between different fighting styles and melee weapons is the key to climbing the style rankings. As ever, enemies are designed in such a way as to encourage, if not quite force, you to switch up your approach; large, or shield-bearing foes require a heavier weapon, while the smaller, flightier kind are best dealt with using something with a little more zip. While we've always felt more comfortable with the latter, the bigger weapons here are an absolute joy to use. The pick of the bunch sees Dante fight with half a motorcycle on each fist. Normal blows pack quite the punch, but hammer an attack button and the two halves are joined together, Dante sending enemies back to the netherworld by jumping on the saddle and performing a relentlessly damaging series of donuts.

It's bonkers, yes, and we can't help but wonder if there's a limit to what Capcom considers acceptable when it comes to Dante's most outlandish attacking tools. "There *is* such a thing as too crazy!" Itsuno says. "The motorcycle that changes into, essentially, a dual-wielded chainsaw? It's pretty cool. But you can go over that line, and have ideas that are so ridiculous, they'd just feel like we were trying too hard. We're constantly trying to straddle that line." ▶

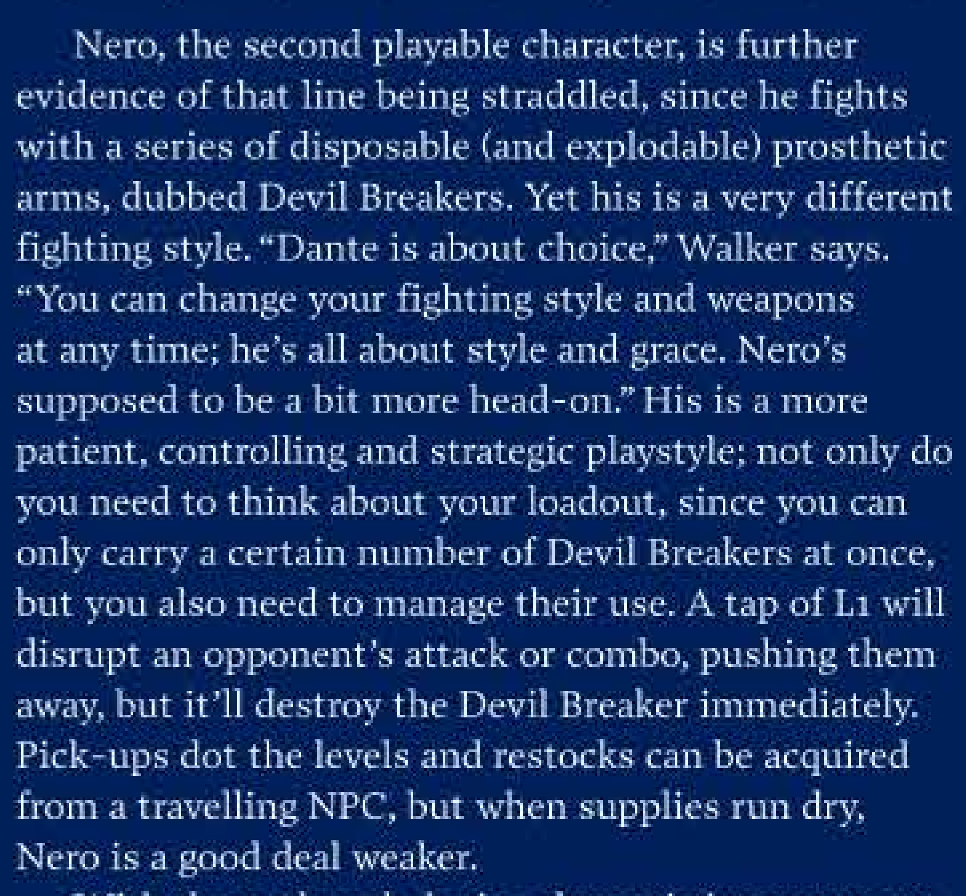


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Familiarity is key in any series with legs, and as such the sight of Nero duffing enemies up with his magic arms is a welcome one indeed. Yet the game will be judged primarily on the success of what it contributes to the series formula: in that sense, new character V is the most important of the game's three protagonists

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Nero, the second playable character, is further evidence of that line being straddled, since he fights with a series of disposable (and explodable) prosthetic arms, dubbed Devil Breakers. Yet his is a very different fighting style. "Dante is about choice," Walker says. "You can change your fighting style and weapons at any time; he's all about style and grace. Nero's supposed to be a bit more head-on." His is a more patient, controlling and strategic playstyle; not only do you need to think about your loadout, since you can only carry a certain number of Devil Breakers at once, but you also need to manage their use. A tap of L1 will disrupt an opponent's attack or combo, pushing them away, but it'll destroy the Devil Breaker immediately. Pick-ups dot the levels and restocks can be acquired from a travelling NPC, but when supplies run dry, Nero is a good deal weaker.

With them, though, he is a dramatic improvement on his incarnation in *Devil May Cry 4*, though the fundamentals of his playstyle are the same. If Dante is about getting up in the enemy's face, Nero is about putting them exactly where he wants them; get up in the air with one opponent and, once they've been dealt with, you can pull the next up towards you, or you to them. New special attacks, unique to each Devil Breaker, add the requisite style and destructive power, the effect depending on whether you're on the ground or in the air. One Breaker's grounded special is a Kamehameha-style energy beam, which can be manually aimed as it fires; in the air, Nero will unleash a volley of lasers in multiple directions.

Less is known about V, the third playable character, beyond his role in the story: he's the one who seeks Dante's help to rid Red Grave City of its demonic infestation. Yet one look at V tells you that he is going to handle quite differently. He carries a book and walks with a cane; he doesn't exactly scream heavy-metal badass. "With Dante and Nero, we did our best to make them so that they would have separate playstyles, but there is some overlap between them: they both have guns and melee weapons," Itsuno says. "If you get good at playing one of those characters... they're relatives, so it makes sense that you'd be able to get good with the other one, to an extent. V, on the other hand, doesn't have a sword or a gun, so he's in a completely different place, and fights in a completely different way.

"Because of that, whether you're a fan of the series of are completely new to it, V is a new starting point for everyone. We're really looking forward to seeing how people are going to respond to it. We think he's really cool."

Dante may be back, and may never have looked better. But V, as his name implies, is *Devil May Cry 5*'s secret sauce. For all the advancements in technology, for all the new additions to one of the most satisfying battle systems around, the most remarkable thing about *Devil May Cry 5* is the number at the end. This is a beloved series in a genre with plenty of passionate fans, but it's all too rare for a game of this kind to have staying power. How has *Devil May Cry* bucked the trend, and spanned three console generations? Itsuno, naturally for someone who's worked on every game except the original, has the answer.

"In order for a series to have staying power, it has to be able to bring in new fans, as well as continue to please existing ones," he says. "If it can't bring in new people, the series is going to die out. I think about the games I love – fighting games and horizontal shooters. They come out with an amazing game, and it's exactly what players are looking for at the time. Then you have to look at, what's the *Plus Alpha* for this game? What's the extra element that you're going to add on? And it gets more and more complex, so it gets harder and harder for newcomers to come in and enjoy the series.

> "FOR A SERIES TO HAVE STAYING POWER, IT HAS TO BE ABLE TO BRING IN NEW FANS"

"In *Devil May Cry 4*, I very specifically tried to address that by making the initial playable character Nero. By giving people a new character to play with we were saying, 'Okay, this is a new style for *Devil May Cry*'. Eventually we gave people Dante, so once newcomers were used to playing Nero, they had Dante and all his different options at their disposal. That's the key, really. You have to have something that's approachable and enjoyable for people who are new to the series, as well as people that already love it."

That may sound like, with V waiting in the wings, *Devil May Cry 5* is yet to reveal to us its real magic. If that's the case we may be in for something special indeed. This series has never looked so spectacular, or been so varied in its combat; we have seen barely a sniff of the former, and the latter will be further bolstered by an apparent wimp with a walking stick. It may call to mind a handful of other Capcom classics, but *Devil May Cry* has a class and style all of its own. In the unlikely event it somehow doesn't quite come together as planned, it will at least go down in history as Capcom's finest love letter to the hit pause. Bang, oof, pow. See you in March. ■

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COLLECTED WORKS
YASUYUKI ODA

FATAL FURY SPECIAL
Developer/publisher SNK **Format** FM Towns, Game Gear, Neo Geo, PC Engine, Sega CD, SNES, X68000 **Release** 1993

ART OF FIGHTING 2
Developer/publisher SNK **Format** Arcade, Neo Geo, SNES **Release** 1994

GAROU: MARK OF THE WOLVES
Developer/publisher SNK **Format** Arcade, Dreamcast, Neo Geo **Release** 1999

STREET FIGHTER IV
Developer Capcom, Dimps **Publisher** Capcom **Format** Arcade, PS3, X360 **Release** 2008

KING OF FIGHTERS XIV
Developer/publisher SNK **Format** Arcade, PC, PS4 **Release** 2016

SNK HEROINES: TAG TEAM FRENZY
Developer/publisher SNK **Format** Arcade, PS4, Switch **Release** 2018

The SNK veteran and Street Fighter IV designer on three decades fighting the good fight

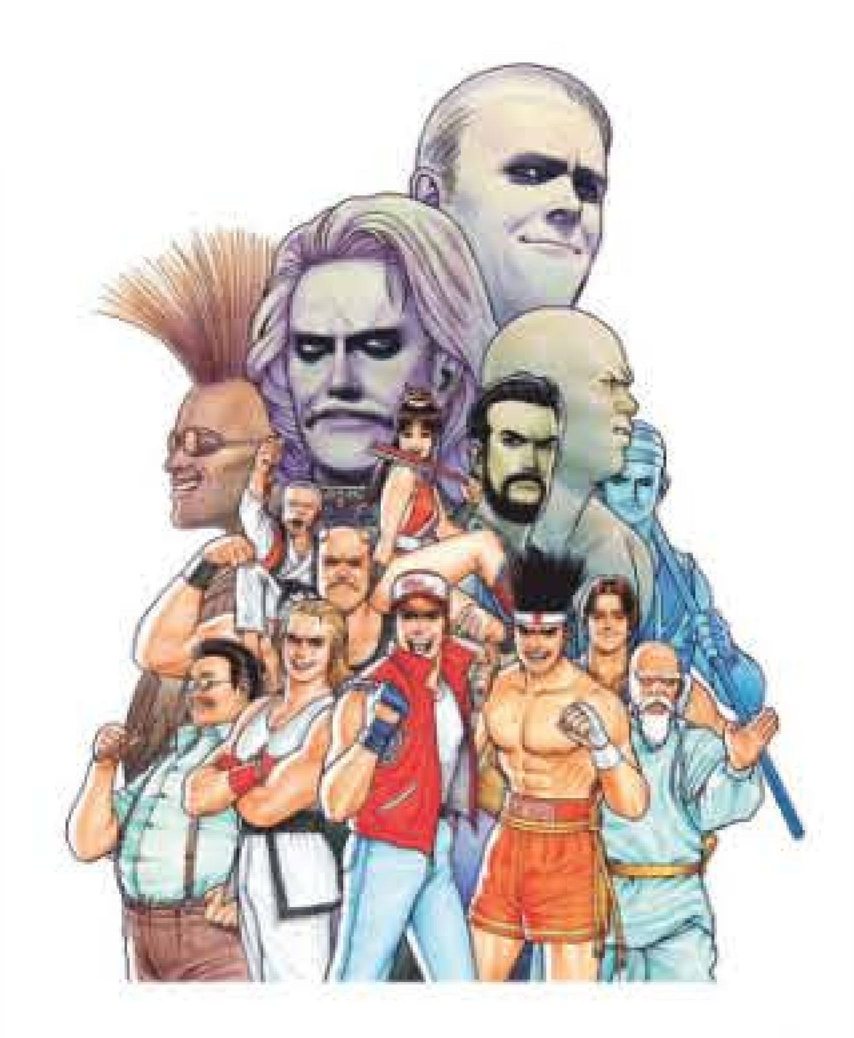
By Simon Parkin

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As a keen young animator eager to join the game industry, but reluctant to leave his home city of Osaka, **Yasuyuki Oda**'s options were limited – if you can call it that – to Capcom, Konami and SNK. After graduating from art college and while still working part-time in a supermarket, Oda secured an interview at SNK, whose games he knew from the arcades, where he'd spend much of his free time playing *Ikari Warriors*.

He took with him a bulging folder of character designs and animation stills and, when he was led into the interview room, found himself sat at a table across from Seigo Ito, director of the *Fatal Fury* series. After answering Ito's questions, Oda was passed an envelope containing a small amount of money, intended to cover his travel costs, a standard practice in Japan at the time but one that was unknown to the twenty-year-old. "I figured they'd just liked me and decided to give me some money," he later recalled. Oda walked out of SNK's offices and promptly headed for the arcades, in order to spend his unexpected bonus.

It was a fitting start to a career of which much has been spent in and around arcades. As the producer of SNK's Game Division Studio 1, Oda has been responsible for some of the best-regarded fighting games of all time. After a brief stint at Dimps, where he was instrumental in the design of *Street Fighter IV*, in 2014 Oda returned to the company where he made his name to reboot *Street Fighter*'s great rival, *King Of Fighters*.







Fatal Fury's boss Wolfgang Krauser employs a unique style of fighting that fuses the German martial art Kampfringen with the ancient Greek style of Pankration. His style was supposedly inspired by the 1970s Japanese comic-book character Tiger Mask

FATAL FURY SPECIAL

Developer/publisher SNK **Format** FM Towns, Game Gear, Neo Geo, PC Engine, Sega CD, SNES, X68000 **Release** 1993

The first thing I had to do after I joined SNK was to take part in a new-staff-member training programme. This had nothing to do with the work I'd be doing. It covered things like how to answer the telephone, or how to professionally present your business card to people. It was a three-day course, but I only managed to get through the first. I stayed at home playing games the second two days.

At the time I couldn't afford a Neo Geo home system; it was too expensive for any student. But SNK offered staff discounts, so with my first paycheck I bought one. *Fatal Fury Special* was the first game that I worked on. The project was already in development at the company when I arrived. It was one of two fighting games in development at the time, the other being *Art Of Fighting*. The two series may look similar but they have quite different sensibilities, which you can see if you look at the way in which they're animated. There is a popular manga in Japan called Shonen Jump. The way the characters move in *Fatal Fury* was similar to the panels in that comic. *Art Of Fighting*, by contrast, was more similar to Fist Of The North Star.

I was very happy to be assigned to *Fatal Fury* but the work was extremely hard. I

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would only go home once a week, on a Sunday morning, and then I'd be back at work by Sunday afternoon. Often I would only sleep four hours a night. You can work like this when you're a young person, but looking back on it today I can't believe it. The base salary was poor, but at least I got bonuses. At that time there weren't really strict rules on how these were handed out, so it often felt like we were at the mercy of our boss' mood. Since I was basically living at the office for the entire year I rarely had a chance to even put that money to use.

My first role was game balancing and debugging. I worked on this for around four months. I would play the game over and over again, hundreds of times a day, tweaking damage values, the speed at which the animation frames would trigger, and the size and position of the hitboxes. *Fatal Fury Special* was a major success for SNK. I think this came down to the fact that it was a lively game, the animations were cool and you could chain combos together. All this contributed to its success.

Now, some people say that the difficulty of the bosses in SNK games isn't very well balanced, and of course this was absolutely intentional. If someone has played through a game at the arcade to reach the final boss, they are more likely to pay extra credits in order to see how the story ends, and make it to the credits. The difficulty of those bosses is a design driven by economics as much as anything.

ART OF FIGHTING 2

Developer/publisher SNK **Format** Arcade, Neo Geo, SNES **Release** 1994

I was placed on the art team, working on animation and graphics, and was so happy to finally be doing the kind of work that I had studied at college. I was specifically responsible for the character Takuma Sakazaki. This is how it worked at SNK at the time: one artist would be responsible for one character. Sakazaki had been the final boss in the previous game, so it was essentially a character refresh.



King, an androgynous Muay Thai fighter modelled on the singer Grace Jones, features heavily in *King Of Fighters*, but debuted in *Art Of Fighting* as its sole playable female character. She was referred to as 'he' in the marketing materials, however

"WE WOULD DO THE TUNING IN THE OFFICE, THEN WE WOULD TAKE A PROTOTYPE TO THE ARCADE"



Everyone at SNK had quite a specific role, but my case was a little special. While I had trained as an artist, I was also very interested in game balance, so I had asked if I could be involved in this work as well. It worked like this: we would do the balancing and tuning in the office, then we would take a prototype to the local arcade. Then I would stand around and watch and take notes while members of the public played.

If it was player versus computer, I would be checking the difficulty to make sure the game wasn't too easy or too hard, and keeping a close watch on the AI to ensure that the computer wasn't using the same moves over and over. For versus play I would be checking whether or not one particular move was overpowered. This was crucial because fans would get angry anytime they found something like an infinite combo, whereby it was possible to be stuck in a simple combo with no means of escape. They'd also be cross about a change in a particular character's design, or a change to a specific move or technique. Sometimes they would ▶

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complain to us directly, but more often they would use the surveys and such that we left there to collect feedback as a way to write all of their complaints down. In the past we actually treated some of the super-move command inputs as confidential secrets, and I had instances where fans would chase me down trying to pull that specific info from me.

Some of the most exciting times were leading up to and during these location tests, but it was always stressful when bugs popped up right in front of you. Sometimes the players would even get angry or make fun of us. That said, it was always a great experience seeing the players play our game in person. Location tests in that period were almost like a festival. People would line up in advance of the arcade opening and stay there until midnight when the arcade closed. Seeing so many fans enjoy the game over the course of an entire day was a great atmosphere and very fun for me. Some players were so dedicated to the event that they would bring their own lunch. I remember times when the entire neighbourhood would be overflowing with cosplayers who were also attending the event.

GAROU: MARK OF THE WOLVES

Developer/publisher SNK **Format** Arcade, Dreamcast, Neo Geo **Release** 1999

Between 1993 and 2000, when I first worked at SNK, I was promoted through the company to a position of seniority where I was made director on *Mark Of The Wolves*. Finally, I had the chance to make the kind of game that I wanted to make, essentially from scratch. My boss told me I had complete freedom to make any changes that I wanted.

Now, for a long time I had wanted to make a game that was quicker, in the granular sense of the amount of time between the player pressing a button and the on-screen character executing a guard or an attack. This meant removing between two and four frames of animation. Prior to this, due to the fact we had these longer input windows in our games, skilful players could execute very long combos, which I felt resulted in boring matches. By reducing the number of frames, it made the combos shorter and brisker, which made matches more enjoyable to play and to watch. On the other hand, when the attacks connected in *Mark Of The Wolves*, I made the window longer, extending the so-called 'hit stop'. This gives the player an increased sense of drama and impact.



Mark Of The Wolves (below) is among the best-loved Neo Geo fighting games. It's one of the few fighters of the era to still feature on the tournament circuit

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I also wanted to introduce an almost entirely new character roster. So we were able to develop character designs from nothing. It was, essentially, a complete refresh. This was the first time I had the chance to design my own characters. There was no direction; we were able to make whatever we wanted. So I made the characters smaller than in previous *Fatal Fury* games, which allowed them to move from one side of the screen to the other much more quickly. The game was very well-received at the time.

Of course, we all knew that the Neo Geo wasn't going to last forever. To be honest, on the development floor we were all eager to move on to PlayStation from quite an early stage. I don't know if there were any plans for a new Neo Geo console, but whatever happened, our view on the development side was that we simply wanted to make games for popular platforms.

During Neo Geo's prime, rival companies had started to release 3D games for rival hardware. SNK was still focusing on games featuring 2D sprites, so we had to make up for being unable to use 3D cameras to create impactful scenes by putting more work and detail into all of our characters and stages. The artists at SNK would pay an incredible level of attention to the designs. Look at Geese Howard from the *King Of Fighters* series, for example. For his super move, Raging Storm, we re-worked the animations on his fingers specifically in order to make it look as evil as possible. That was the level of detail we were focused on.

"WE WERE ALL EAGER TO MOVE ON TO PLAYSTATION FROM QUITE AN EARLY STAGE"

STREET FIGHTER IV

Developer Capcom, Dimps **Publisher** Capcom **Format** Arcade, PS3, X360 **Release** 2008

In February of 2000, I left SNK to join Dimps. There wasn't really a sense among those of us in the development teams that SNK was about to close or anything like that. But Takashi Nishiyama had left SNK to found Dimps with Keiji Inafune, who had designed the original *Street Fighter*. Nishiyma took a lot of the people who had



worked on the *Fatal Fury* series with him, so I went too.

The team at Dimps was making various prototypes for a game and, at some point in that process, the decision was made to turn this into *Street Fighter IV*. There was a lot of discussion about how the game could work in 3D. We came up with various ideas, and slowly we started to zero in on the style and mechanics. While there were later iterations – *Super* and *Ultra* and so on – I am so proud of how the first game came out; it remains, I think, a truly wonderful game.

While *Fatal Fury* was a direct competitor to *Street Fighter* right from the beginning, I had always liked both series. In fact, when I was a student I would mainly play *Street Fighter II*, so it was fantastic to have the chance to work for ▶

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the other side, as it were. Besides, for me, the two series are quite distinct. With *Street Fighter*, each character represents a different fighting style, and so he or she must be designed to present the true embodiment of that fighting style. In *Fatal Fury*, by contrast, the characters do not have to embody a martial arts style; they are characters in and of themselves, with backstories and so on. There is more freedom.

There were differences in the working environment too. I would say that I had more freedom at SNK. At Capcom, the higher-ups had a tighter degree of control and input over what was happening with the game, and what they wanted it to be. I worked closely with Yoshinori Ono from Capcom, who was producer on the game. In the early months Ono led everything. The development period for the game was so long that there were times we lost our way a little. Ono was very good at helping us cleave to his vision. He was a good leader.

KING OF FIGHTERS XIV

Developer/publisher SNK **Format** Arcade, PC, PS4
Release 2016

While I was working on *Street Fighter IV*, most of the SNK staff were thrown to the four corners of the Japanese videogame industry. Still, twice a year we would all meet up for drinks. During that entire time, one staff member had stayed with SNK. Whenever we got together he would speak to each of us privately, trying to convince us to come back. He'd talk about how the environment was extremely positive, and the development team had the freedom to make the kinds of games they wanted to make. In early 2014 he managed to convince me, so I left Dimps and, in February that year, re-joined SNK.

With *King Of Fighters XIV* I was actually doing a similar thing to that which I had done at Dimps: taking a well-loved series and moving it into 3D. We didn't take the 2D animations and 3D-ify them. We referenced them, of course, but the entire game and animation system was built from the ground up. The 3D animator who did this work had also worked on *Fatal Fury* before moving to Dimps to work on *Street Fighter IV*. SNK managed to poach him back as well.



In recent years SNK has largely rejected the 2D pixel art for which the company earned its name, switching to 3D, a choice that arguably does not make the best use of the company's once-lauded artists. *KOFXIV* is not without its charms, however

"MAKING GAMES FOR YEARS, I'M USED TO RELEASING ONE AND HAVING IT GET BASHED"



Street Fighter IV revitalised interest in fighting games. A lot of that success was down to the marketing team at Capcom as much as the development team at Dimps. They did an excellent job, not only of promoting the game and producing this groundswell of interest and excitement, but also in checking the market, and predicting that the time was ripe for a revival. And it's true. The idea for making *King Of Fighters XIV* came from *Street Fighter IV*'s success.

I wanted to create a game that truly lived up to the expectations that had been set in the market. I wanted there to be a large roster of characters. The animators wanted to kill me. It was gruelling work to get everything ready in time for the game's launch, but we managed it. The *King Of Fighters* community has a reputation for being, shall we say, opinionated. But I wasn't too nervous at launch. You know, making games for all these years, I'm used to releasing a game and having it get bashed. I expected some people to like the game and others to be less enamoured. I was ready for whatever came our way. ▶

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SNK HEROINES: TAG TEAM FRENZY

Developer/publisher SNK **Format** Arcade, PS4, Switch **Release** 2018

The female characters in the SNK catalogue are all extremely popular. So internally we started having discussions about whether or not we might be able to make a game that showcased just the women. That was the impetus behind the idea. But there are unique challenges to making an all-female fighting game, of course. Specifically, it's tough to ensure the costume designs are just right so that it's easy to see which character is which at a glance, and also that there is consistency and coherence between a single character's wardrobes. That presents a significant challenge for the costume designer.

More generally, with a two-on-two fighting game there is added complexity, not only in terms of displaying the information on the screen, but also in terms of figuring out how the various characters will engage with their teammates in action. *SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy* takes place, story-wise, after the end of *King Of Fighters XIV*. At the end of that game, all of the characters are revived, so we had the pick of the bunch. Selecting which characters we wanted to use from our catalogue was difficult. We ended up splitting the women into three distinct groups: characters who we know are popular, characters who we want to make more popular and then, finally, the more random, leftfield choices.

Because the game is for the Nintendo Switch, which, when played as a handheld, sits quite large in the hands, it was a challenge figuring out how to make the game both accessible and deep. In a traditional fighting game you have a stick and different input patterns to execute special moves. As far as possible we wanted to eliminate these arcane finger patterns. In other words, how can we create a game that is fun and playable using a gamepad? That was a major part of our focus. There's an additional challenge because, in Japan at least, the game released in arcades as well. Trying to bridge these two worlds was complicated.

My hope is that *SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy* will continue to expand the market for fighting games. The scene is still rather narrow, although esports is slowly changing that. That said, just because a person watched the World Cup doesn't automatically mean that they go out and start playing football. So we will see. ■



Those who find *SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy*'s art style a turnoff will be looking towards the recently announced *Samurai Spirits* reboot, which takes its visual cues from *Street Fighter IV*'s inky style, instead of softcore grot

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WONDER







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LANDS

Down the rabbit hole with Amanita Design, the highly irregular indie studio growing at its own pace

By Jen Simpkins





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When Amanita Design founder **Jakub Dvorský** isn't making games, you might find him tending to his plum trees. In the summer, he and his family escape to their cottage in the east of the Czech Republic, far away from the tourists and the noise, and Dvorský loses himself in his garden. As we sit and sip black tea in Amanita's cosy, eight-desk studio in central Prague, his latest crop is patiently fermenting somewhere, ready to be made into plum brandy. "It's great, homemade," he says. "When you're making it homemade from your own fruit, from trees you cared about, it's a great feeling. If it's rotten or something, you don't put it there: you pick only the best plums. And then you can feel it when you drink it, that it's there. It makes me happy."

For Dvorský and his multi-award-winning studio, making games comes just as naturally. That's not to say it comes *easily*. Amanita has built a reputation on creating fantastically detailed worlds through art and animation, which brings surreal settings and characters to charming life. From the finely mossed tree trunks and caverns of the *Samorost* series, to the hand-drawn steampunk city vistas of *Machinarium*, or even the sheer amount of animations crammed into the cherry-fuelled slapstick of *Chuchel*, everything Amanita makes is painstakingly, beautifully done. Each game is a little ode to artistry.

Amanita's worlds might look like wonders from the outside, but from an inside perspective, it's all quite simple. Indeed,





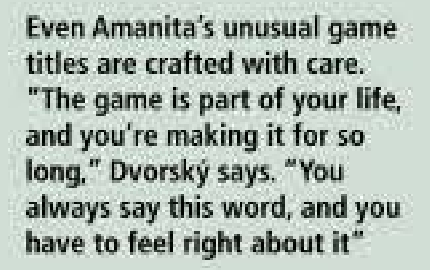




Many of Amanita's games, such as *Machinarium*, are elevated by fiendishly creative music and sound design. Incredibly, both talented culprits share the same name – Tomáš Dvorák – although the composer goes by the alias Floex

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Even Amanita's unusual game titles are crafted with care. "The game is part of your life, and you're making it for so long," Dvorský says. "You always say this word, and you have to feel right about it"







Samorost 3 was the first full-length game in the series. Its five-year development remains one of the most testing periods in Amanita's history

trying to coax a studio of Czechs – famed for their rather direct manner – into dreamily philosophical explanations of why Amanita does things the way it does is no easy task. Amanita has its "own way", Dvorský says: the studio simply has its vision for a game, no matter how odd it may seem, and it works patiently until it is done to a standard everyone is happy with, no matter how long it takes.

But there are mysteries to unpick: how a studio filled with traditional artists found itself making games at all, for instance. Or why they're made to such an exceptionally high artistic standard, over more years than is probably sensible for an indie studio. And how, after 15 years of Amanita, the five games we're shown during our visit (not all of which are ready to be announced) show the studio finally branching out from the point-and-click genre on which it made its name – to cardboard creations, and horror games, and even an open world. Was it finally time to freshen things up, we wonder? "No, no," Dvorský says. "It's kind of an organic thing, an organic development. It's just coincidence." Amanita, like the red-and-white spotted mushroom after which it is named, is a natural product of its environment, some cultivation, and perhaps a bit of chance. To Dvorský, asking why Amanita is the way it is is like asking why a mushroom grows. We get the feeling he'd prefer us just to eat the damn mushroom.

As the son of two artists – his father an illustrator of animals for scientific journals, his mother a film director – Dvorský grew up among fantasy worlds. He loved to read, write, play on his Atari, and also to draw. "Small little things, like castles, and maps, especially medieval maps – I loved it," he says. "I was influenced a lot by Tolkien's books. I made a comic book of The Hobbit when I was about 12 or 13. It took me a year to make it. It was really detailed." When he got his first PC, he began to experiment with animation, using a mouse to draw. Despite his parents' skills, he was determined to learn on his own. "I'm that kind of person. Some people read manuals, some people prefer to go the trial-and-error way. It's less efficient probably, slower, but it's more satisfying, for me at least."

He was 15 when he started making his own games, and released three of them alongside Tomáš Dvorák (now Amanita Design's CFO) while studying in high school. "I was pretty disappointed by the whole industry because we were screwed by our publisher," he says. "I realised that this is a dirty business, full of businessmen. I was really annoyed. Even the Czech press at that time was kind of terrible and corrupted. It was the '90s, a wild period, especially here in Eastern Europe." He set his sights on a different goal, freelance graphic design, and enrolled in the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague to study animated film. It was here that he met animator Václav Blín, and later several others who would go on to become collaborators at his studio.

The course centred more on film than animation, but Dvorský was content, free to experiment with his own projects. *Samorost* was one of them. "It was a very experimental project. I didn't even intend to make a game, actually – I wanted to make some interactive project, and I didn't really know what I was doing." At the time, he was experimenting with collage, venturing out to forests to snap pictures of moss, roots and mushrooms and constructing a little world with them, animating characters in Flash. "In the end, it happened that I had to admit to myself that it was a game." It eventually became his diploma submission, and received a B from Dvorský's highly traditional art school.

Elsewhere, it was a different story. *Samorost* accidentally launched Amanita Design as a game studio, and Dvorský's career. He had originally come up with the ▶

"I DIDN'T EVEN INTEND TO MAKE A GAME, ACTUALLY – I WANTED TO MAKE SOME INTERACTIVE PROJECT"



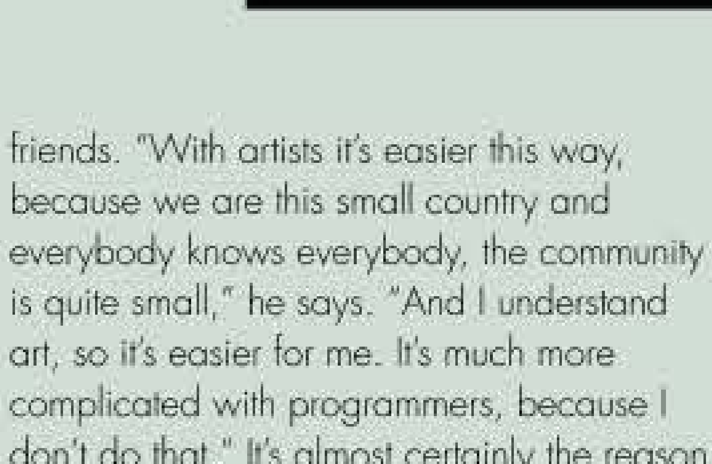
Jakub Dvorský, founder and CEO of Amanita Design

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"I think our games affect our side projects," Dvorský says, "because all those side projects are solo projects, but we work on the games together"



"I WAS ALWAYS GOING AGAINST THE HERD, IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION THAN EVERYONE ELSE. IT'S MORE FUN"



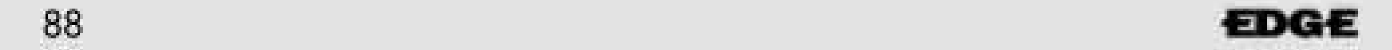
studio name as a brand for his professional creations as a freelance graphic designer, illustrator and animator. But the Internet was changing everything about the industry he thought he had abandoned. "Flash was very important, because I was able to build the game without a programmer. I think it helped to build the whole indie scene, because many people were able to just quickly prototype things and experiment. Even put it on the web, so many people could play. I put [*Samorost*] on the web, and that was it – I didn't need any publisher, which I really liked." It scooped a Webby award and attracted a great number of admirers, and that was that. Dvorský was a game designer.

He and Blín continued making games together: commission pieces for companies such as Nike and the BBC. But Dvorský knew it was crucial to find the right structure and direction for his young studio. The idea was for it to operate almost like a record label, which would allow the team to work freely on their own side projects as well as mainline games. "I admired Bullfrog a lot, because they made very diverse games – *Syndicate*, and *Dungeon Keeper*, and *Magic Carpet*," he says. "But all those games had something similar, or some atmosphere or feeling."

Dvorský's hiring strategy focused strongly on artists, rather than experienced game makers, and often on recommendations from friends. "With artists it's easier this way, because we are this small country and everybody knows everybody, the community is quite small," he says. "And I understand art, so it's easier for me. It's much more complicated with programmers, because I don't do that." It's almost certainly the reason that the studio stuck to making games in Flash for so long, from the first *Samorost* all the way up until its most recent release, *Chuchel*.

Amanita's first full-length game, 2009's *Machinarium*, however, required a proper programmer. David Oliva responded to a job posting on Amanita's forums. "We met, and I realised, 'I know this guy from the bar!' He lived in the same square as me, in Brno." Not all hires have worked out, however, and it's clear Dvorský is protective of Amanita, this bizarre little studio growing out of the cracks in the pavement of Prague. While his studio has gleefully produced games akin to audiovisual hallucinations, the rest of the Czech dev scene has grown into a very different form around it. SCS Software has seen success with its *Truck Simulator* series; likewise Bohemia Interactive with its military simulation games. "This realism, it's common to a lot of Czech companies – not to us," Dvorský laughs. "We are a total opposite. And maybe that's also part of it – we're like the opposition. I was always going against the herd, in a different direction than everyone else. It's more fun."

Over the years, Dvorský has adjusted to a leadership role, even if he doesn't really think of himself as 'the boss'. "I didn't have any ambitions to do that, but it happened somehow, naturally," he says. It took him a long time to realise that he needed help with the day-to-day running of the studio, and to





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This "panda" (above) is one of the less disturbing things we see in Jaromír Plachý's unannounced horror game. Its hero seems to take inspiration from the one in his music video for Vespering (left), a song by Amanita house band Dva. "Our games are definitely influenced by the art of all of us," Dvorský says. "It doesn't really matter where you put it, this vision, if it's puppets, film or a game. The vision is still there"

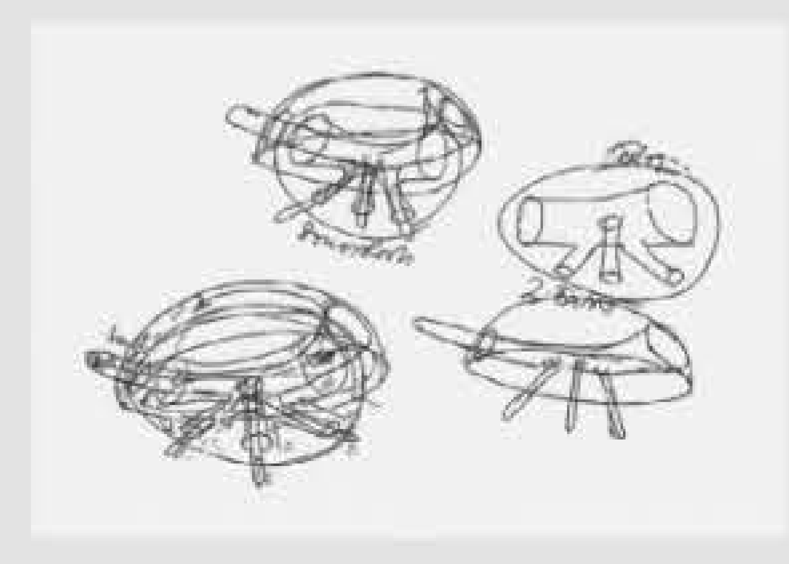
trust that other people would be up to the task: for a long time, he was personally handling all of Amanita's PR. "I am a bit of a control freak," he admits. "And I am also a perfectionist. But compared to my colleagues, it's nothing – they are so much more." He has plenty more colleagues nowadays, all perfecting their own projects under the Amanita Design label. Alongside a few of its own internally developed games, Amanita has selectively expanded, helping develop and market a couple of externally founded projects – *Phonopolis*, a gorgeous-looking mobile puzzler designed entirely in cardboard, and *Creaks*, an atmospheric horror puzzle-platformer with a twist.

But the glue that holds it all together is that Bullfrog-esque idea of a common purpose that unites everyone's (now quite varied) work under one label. "I think it's the art, and animation," Dvorský says, when we ask him to define Amanita's version of it. "We like to follow on this tradition of Czech animators and filmmakers. And handicraft – there's a lot of handicraft in our games. Some kind of playfulness. And it means something. Well-thought out, with an artistic message to express." A childhood spent playing adventure games such as *Myst* and *The Neverhood* meant that Amanita's output naturally tended in that direction from the very beginning. And there was something that specifically drew Dvorský to making games in the point-and-click adventure genre above all else, the one thing that inspired *Samorost* all those years ago at art school. "The worlds," he says with a small smile. "The worlds." ▶



Václav Blín is one of Dvorský's oldest friends: they started collaborating in 2004. He's also one of the people behind Amanita's first open world game







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You have to be a little bit obsessive to make an Amanita game. You certainly wouldn't guess immediately from the looks of its idyllic Prague headquarters. It's a space that looks and feels more like a home than an office – it's warm and cosy, with bicycles parked outside and shoes left at the door. A kettle is boiling in the kitchen. Two comfy sofas face one another right in the middle of the main workspace, an invitation to lounge. With its open-plan layout, fan-made Amanita character statues and the odd empty bottle of Pilsner adorning the desks, the air is light and casual.

Looking closer, however, there are clear signs of the kinds of people that Dvorský has carefully added to his studio in the past few years. The first thing we notice is all the cardboard. These painted scraps form part of *Phonopolis*, a mobile puzzle game whose sets are designed and constructed in cardboard. It has spilled out from beyond the loose confines of designer **Oto Dostál**'s makeshift 'workshop' on the left-hand side of the room, alongside plenty of PVA glue and pots of paintbrushes – their tiny bristles used by co-designer Petr Filipovic to paint models, often one microscopic dot of acrylic paint at a time.

Inspired by the bold aesthetics of Futurism and Russian conservatism, *Phonopolis*' art



Phonopolis **is Amanita's first tentative step into 3D. "We use forced perspective to make it half 2D, half 3D, to make it somehow flat," Filipovic says, "so it looks like something between reality and a picture"**

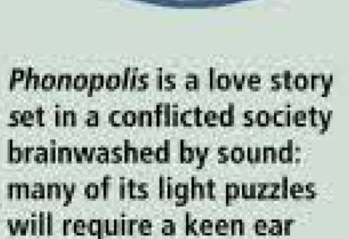
Each animation sprite is painted at least four times, differences between frames creating a stop-motion effect. "Not sitting in front of the computer all the time, actually making something physical with my hands, it's a nice change of pace", Dostál says. "You just put on headphones with music, and do dots"





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Phonopolis is a love story set in a conflicted society brainwashed by sound: many of its light puzzles will require a keen ear



style blends physical and digital. Every single visual element of the game is designed on a computer, then flattened into 2D templates and printed onto cardboard. Backgrounds, characters and effects are then cut out, slotted and folded into 3D dioramas, and painted in bright acrylics. The edges of the models are distressed using sandpaper. "And scalpels – really rough!" Dostál says. "If you put these things back into the computer, you lose something. So it's better to exaggerate, and then most of it will still be visible." The idea is to evoke the kind of nostalgia one might feel when opening up an old box full of wooden toys: scuffed, well-loved, somehow warm and real. Then, the models are photographed and scanned back into a computer for post-processing.

It is intricate and painstaking work – we are handed a giant stack of crumpled paper and cardboard and are told that this comprises just two short levels – but the effect is magical. No wonder Dvorský felt that *Phonopolis* should be an Amanita game. Dostál felt it should be, too. "When it comes to games I really like, style-wise or atmosphere-wise, there is just Amanita Design in Czech Republic, basically," Dostál laughs. *Phonopolis* was conceived in the spare moments between his and his team's freelance work on music videos and other projects, but after securing some funding from the Media European Fund, they were able to create their first real set of visuals. Then, they got in touch with Dvorský. "So it slowly became an Amanita game. They just decided to support us," Dostál says.

There's a spirit to *Phonopolis* that makes it feel like the right fit for Amanita: the handmade feel that the team strives to achieve and retain throughout the process

"CHUCHEL LOOKS SO SIMPLE, BUT IT'S LIKE AN ANIMATED FEATURE FILM, OR EVEN TWO FEATURE FILMS TOGETHER"

is a huge factor. "When I was consulting with these guys, I always loved the way *Phonopolis* looked," Dvorský says. "Not only did the concept art look great, the world was interesting, and thoughtful. I felt there was a message. And I felt that it could be our game, easily. It was very close to us." As one seamless whole, the teetering towers of sprite sheets, careful hand-detailing and post-production trickery transform into something magical. A tiny house folds itself into new shapes and rooms – a kitchen, a workshop – at the swipe of a finger. The bobble-headed Architect marches down the street with megaphone in hand, as rows of marching ballerinas trot behind him. Above all, there's this feeling of wonder, that we're peeking into a place so characterful and so believable that it might be real.

It takes a lot of effort to make things look easy, we suppose, and that's one of Amanita's trademarks. "That's true," Dvorský says. "Some players don't realise how much work we put into it. Especially games like *Chuchel* – it looks so simple and easily animated, but very few people realise that there are three hours of animation, maybe more. It's like an animated feature film, or even two feature films together. Few people realise what it takes. But in our minds it's fine: as long as it looks fresh, and light, and not too heavy or overelaborate. I like *Chuchel* because of the feeling that it was made easily." ▶

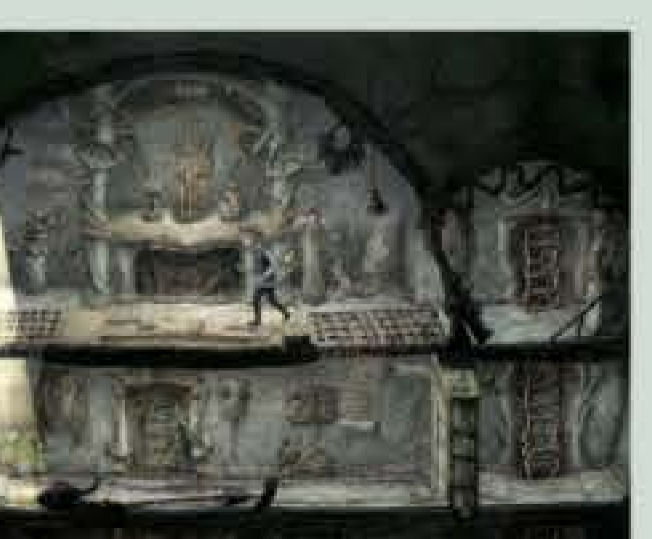


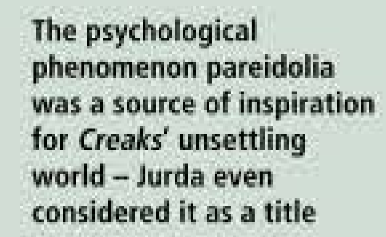


From top: designer and animator Petr Filipovic; designer and technical artist Oto Dostál

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The psychological phenomenon pareidolia was a source of inspiration for *Creaks'* unsettling world – Jurda even considered it as a title



Part of Dvorský's job as CEO is to protect and nurture this feeling. There have been tough times in the studio's history – Dvorský recalls the point at which they were finishing up *Samorost 3*, at the end of a very long five years, as a particularly difficult period. Generally, however, Amanita is in the fortunate position of being able to grow slowly, doing its best work at a sensible pace. It's currently cheap to live and work in the Czech Republic, which eases much of the burden, leaving the group free to develop the kinds of games that don't necessarily need to top the charts to keep Amanita afloat. "We would need two or three times more [money] if we were in the UK, and that's a big pressure," Dvorský says. "We were really successful with our other games, so we are fine, and that's why we can afford to spend as much time as we need."

Horror puzzle-platformer *Creaks* has taken six years, and it shows, the game shot through with Amanita's signature attention to detail. Shears hung on the wall of the rickety house laugh snippily, and teapot lids gently snap open and shut: get closer, and they suddenly stop. The ramshackle old house is more creepy than scary, punctuated with ladders that our character must climb and descend to avoid obstacles and enemies. *Creaks* is Amanita's first move away from the point-and-click genre – we're moving and hopping over platforms using the arrow keys – and also into a slightly more complex, consistent and traditional brand of puzzling, as we figure out how to use light to repel and reposition mechanical guard dogs and move past safely.

In fact, it's all slightly ho-hum at first – atmospheric, with its audible shudderings, squeaks and, yes, creaks, but not quite as strange and new as we might expect. But we can see how it fits with the studio's work ethic: plenty of it is organic, from the hand-drawn backgrounds down to the mechanical paintings, which are done in acrylics, then photographed and digitised. "One of the backgrounds was 12 A4 sheets which I had to scan separately and then connect in the computer again," lead designer **Radim Jurda** says. Since being picked up by Amanita, the workflow has been simplified somewhat, with Jurda creating custom brushes that give the effect of hand-sketching for later levels. "But a big part of the game is like this, I think the first two worlds are like this completely. I think sometimes we want to do it simple, but in the end it ends up like this!" He laughs. "I guess we are all perfectionists at Amanita, and somehow, it's kind of natural for us."

And then we see it: another all-important flash of Amanita. We're made to turn on a light just as a guard dog walks underneath, and find ourselves doing a double take – and laughing – as the creature promptly morphs into a bedside cabinet. Here it is, that bit of whimsy we were missing. And it is *so* Amanita, this theme of the mind playing tricks, that we're almost surprised that the studio hasn't produced a horror game before now. "This idea with the imagination becoming real somehow, it was somehow for Jakub the moment to help him make up his mind to go for it," Jurda says.



Radim Jurda, lead designer and lead artist

It's an illuminating time in which to visit Amanita. After 15 years of building an identity, the studio is branching out, but always in a manner consistent with the core vision. It's clear Dvorský does things at his own pace, but we can't help but wonder why all this diversification is happening now. Does he feel he's done everything he wanted to do with the point-and-click genre? "To some extent, yes," he says. "I think it's possible to evolve this genre even more, and maybe we'll continue. But right now, I felt like I needed to try something different." He mentions Amanita's newest project, a game we have been shown a little of on someone's phone. "It's still in very early stages. But it's open-world, not a linear structure like previous games. The whole interface is a bit different, even though it's still an adventure game, sort of. I wanted to experiment.



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Creaks eschews the traditional Amanita hint system: instead, if you're along the right lines with a puzzle solution, the music builds encouragingly

"The interesting thing about this game is that we don't have a proper prototype yet," he continues. Indeed, the charmingly basic hub and individual interactive scenes (in which puzzles have multiple possible solutions) aren't yet connected together as a working whole. "I really don't know if it works or not at all. I still believe it will, but it's totally possible it won't, or that it won't be fun." And then there's the shocking horror game being made by Jaromír Plachý, the artist behind *Chuchel*. We're allowed to play a brief demo, and leave feeling quite nauseous – but convinced of its Amanita family resemblance. If you thought *Chuchel* got weird in places, you haven't seen anything yet.

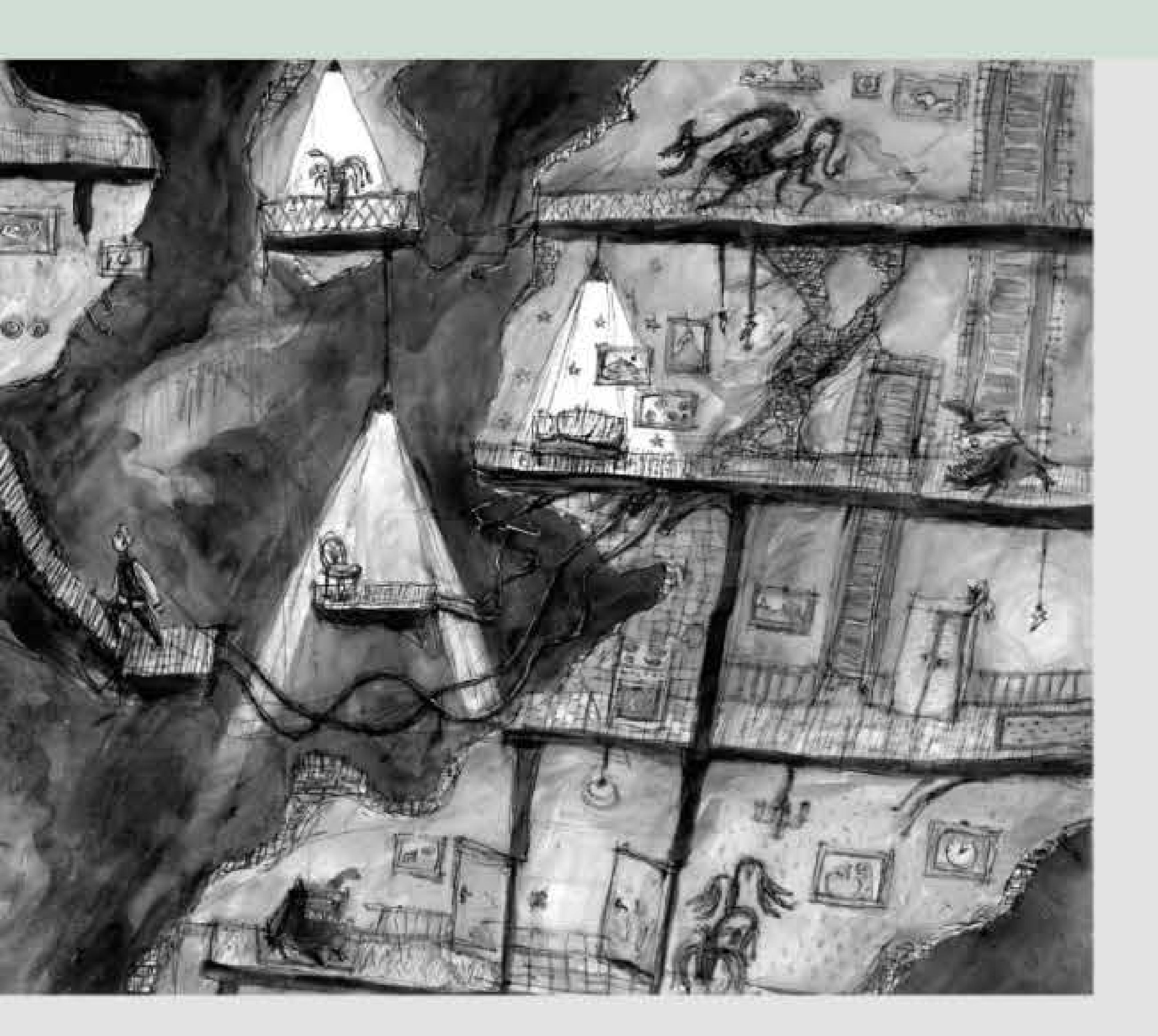
Amanita's broader growth into new genres such as horror, Dvorský tells us, is "an organic development. *Creaks* is made by a new team, so it's their vision. So it's just coincidence. And Jaromír's game, I don't know – he just evolved into this stage for some reason, nobody knows why. He looks fine, and happy. So again, it's kind of a coincidence. But there was a certain darkness in all our previous games. So maybe it was just some kind of natural evolution, and who knows what will come next."

More artists, inevitably – although not too many, so as to preserve Amanita's culture. "But what I understand is that I probably won't come up with some genius ideas in the future, because I'm not young anymore," Dvorský laughs. "But I can help some young talented people maybe, and that's what I'd like to do in future. But I hope we just will continue doing our own stuff, our own way, and I hope we will be still enjoying it, as we do now. That's the most important thing, otherwise it wouldn't make sense."

In the end, all of Amanita's energy goes into creating something that can open a door to fantasy lands that only their artists could dream up; to create places that feel at once real and unreal. Perhaps that's why Dvorský named his studio after Amanita muscaria, the red-and-white spotted toadstool that can induce powerful hallucinations, often associated with Alice's Adventures In Wonderland. "Mushrooms are kind of magical," Dvorský says, smiling. Given the amount of references to mind-altering substances in his games, we have to ask: has he ever taken them? "Oh yeah," he laughs. "Several times. It's hard to put it into words, what it's like." We suggest that perhaps he puts it into games, instead. "There is definitely some kind of inspiration. Those experiences are life-changing, so everything is influenced by it a little bit, to some extent. But Jaromír's games are much more trippy, and he's never done it. It's in his head. But the thing is that all the psychedelic stuff, fractals and colours, is not in those substances, definitely not. There's nothing. It's just a key which opens something in your mind. It's already there." ■



"I THINK IT'S POSSIBLE TO EVOLVE POINT-AND-CLICK MORE. BUT RIGHT NOW, I FELT LIKE I NEEDED TO TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT"





The story takes place over a single night, and sees our hero helping five bird-like characters to protect their world from a gigantic feline monster. *Creaks* is also the first ever Amanita game in which the protagonist can die

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THE MAKING OF...



SHADOWVERSE

How Cygames' collectable card game became the Japanese Hearthstone

By Simon Parkin

Format Android, iOS, PC
Developer Cygames
Publisher Cygames, NetEase
Origin Japan
Release 2016

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At darkened after-hours bars, videogame designers often tipsily discuss what might happen if they were able to leave their employers to strike out on their own as a start-up. In the sober light of the morning few act upon their fantasies. Of those who do make the leap, still fewer are successful enough to make a tale worth telling. The co-founders of Cygames, who left Silicon Studios, creator of *3D Dot Game Heroes* and *Bravely Default*, are a dazzling exception. Released in 2012, the studio's first game, *Rage Of Bahamut*, was a stratospheric hit, holding the top spot on the American iOS charts for 16 weeks and earning more than $5 million per month during its first year. A high-fantasy adventure, it used digital cards as its battle motif, with players selecting attacks from a deck of options. Despite appearances, however, it was a card game in aesthetic only, a source of growing frustration for its CCG-obsessed development team.

This creative frustration was shared by Cygames founder **Yuito Kimura**, a keen Magic: The Gathering player. "There was a clear desire within the development team, which was shared by me, to make a true card game, rather than one that just used cards to represent its mechanics," he tells us. The timing was fortuitous. In spring 2014, Blizzard Entertainment launched *Hearthstone*, a CCG set in the universe of *World Of Warcraft*. The scepticism with which the game's announcement was initially greeted soon dissipated; in a few short weeks *Hearthstone* became a glittering pillar in Blizzard's business model, drawing a generation of PC players to the strategic complexities of the genre. For Kimura, the time was right to explore a collectable card game for the Japanese market. "Digital card games were just beginning to trend on the PC at that time, but there weren't yet any major titles specifically for smartphones," he says. "And in terms of the development ability on the team, and the increasing sophistication of smartphones at the time, the timing felt right."

For all Kimura's enthusiasm for CCGs, Cygames lacked a master designer. In the summer of 2014, soon after *Hearthstone*'s release, former card-game designer **Naoyuki Miyashita** was working at an app developer in Tokyo when a colleague asked him if he might be interested in meeting Kimura to talk over an idea for a digital card game. Miyashita, who had been a professional CCG player, agreed



The *Shadowverse* metagame is constantly shifting as new cards are added and old cards are rebalanced to keep up

to a meeting. Over a match of Magic: The Gathering, Kimura carefully laid out his vision for the game that would become *Shadowverse*. It would be, he explained, a true CCG, set within the *Rage Of Bahamut* universe, which used mechanics that would only be possible in the digital realm. Miyashita was convinced. The next day he quit his job to join Cygames.

"WE COULDN'T FIGURE OUT HOW TO DO BASIC THINGS LIKE DISPENSE OF A CARD DURING BATTLE"

"When we sat down to begin the design, the first question was how to make a card game that could be played on a smartphone screen," Miyashita recalls. "Not only that, our aim was to design a game that felt best when you were playing on a phone." The team, in other words, didn't want the fact the game was being played on a mobile device to feel in any way like a compromise. Nonetheless, Miyashita began to prototype the game on paper. The process proved to be challenging. "*Rage Of Bahamut* had an evolve mechanic, where it was possible to upgrade your cards during a match, which is something we wanted to bring into *Shadowverse*," he says. "That's tough to do on paper."

For Kimura, the challenge was representative of opportunities. "We wanted to make sure that our game design had features that would not be possible in a regular card game," he says. The Spellboost mechanic, for example, buffs cards that are still in your hand, which isn't practically possible in a physical card game, while the Portalcraft class features an ability, Resonance, that depends on the number of cards left in your deck. Invocation pulls cards from your supply and puts them in to play when certain conditions are met. "These sorts of effects simply wouldn't be possible outside of a digital environment."

At the heart of *Shadowverse* sits the evolve mechanic. This allows each player to spend one of their limited number of evolution points to strengthen one of their cards where it sits on the field. Evolving a follower enhances its power, enables it to attack enemy followers on the same turn, and often triggers abilities unique to the card. The first player starts with two evolution points and can evolve from their fifth turn, while the second player starts with three evolution points and can evolve from their fourth turn. It's an ingenious solution to an age-old problem in CCGs: how to mitigate the obvious advantage of being the player who gets to go first. "Evolve helps us to solve the traditional problem of balancing the odds of going first or second, but also making the game exciting through every stage of a match, from the early game through the midgame right up to the endgame," Miyashita says.

Supported by *Rage Of Bahamut*'s ongoing financial success, Kimura was able to give the *Shadowverse* team an enviable length of runway to design, test and tweak the game before launch. The development, however, was not without difficulties. Following feedback from a closed beta test in February 2016, Kimura decided to scrap the entire animation system for the game, concluding that it was too fussy and inelegant. "It was our first time making a visual card game," he explains. "For a long time we couldn't figure out how to do basic things like dispense of a card during battle. At times it felt like it was maybe an impossible task."

After 18 months of development, there was also the issue of the game's scaling, near-unmanageable complexity. Prior to launch the team had designed 400 cards across seven classes, which resulted in a vast number of deck permutations. "We designed some really interesting leader class skills, like the Vengeance mechanic, which associated with the Bloodcraft class, in which certain cards are buffed when your health drops below half," says Kimura. ▶

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"This produced some really interesting control-deck archetypes, where players use cards to move in and out of Vengeance when needed, but also some really fast aggro decks that deal damage to both players in the hope of closing a game out before your opponent can recover." Managing the game balance, however, soon became an issue. "It was tough to keep each of the seven different leader classes balanced in terms of win rates and popularity," Miyashita says. To help ensure balance, Cygames hired a ten-person team of professional Japanese Magic: The Gathering players to relentlessly test different deck builds, allowing the team to tweak values.

Finally, there was the issue of what to call the game. "We needed a name that would work in Japanese and English, and sound strong in both languages," Kimura says. "We had a longlist of around 300 titles, which we slowly whittled down. In the end we implemented a voting system within the team. That got us down to three titles." Finally, Kimura asked the game leads to pick their favourite. "*Sky Fortress* was a popular choice, but *Shadowverse* won out in the end."

Despite the lengthy investment of time, and the sizeable team, Kimura's expectations for the game were modest. "When we launched there were no major PvP card-based smartphone games on the Japanese market," he says. "Our long-term plan, in all honesty, was to appeal to core CCG players and over the course of a year or so, build out from that core into the mainstream." For this reason, Cygames did not book any TV spots, only taking out a small number of poster advertisements on the Tokyo subway. As such, the speed at which the game took hold came as a major surprise. Just four days after its release on June 17, 2016, *Shadowverse* had reached a million downloads. "There were about four million matches being played a day," says Kimura. "Almost immediately we were running at breaking point."

Any team with ambitions to foster a serious competitive culture around a free-to-play game faces issues of fairness, when players who have spent no money in the game are matched against those who have. If players believe they can just pay to win, the competitive community crumbles away. "Those elements of the game that you can't access without paying, or that are difficult to acquire without paying are never connected to winning or losing," Miyashita says. "Of course spending money makes it easier to acquire cards, but it's really important to us that we give players all sorts of ways to acquire cards without paying too." Kimura refers to a rule implemented by Cygames that ensures all cards are unlocked for tournament play. "Like many other FTP games, the main benefit of purchasing in-game items is that it saves the time that would be needed to earn them," he says. "In any case, there are so many other card games that are characterised by random card packs and remain competitive that I don't think it was ever a big issue for us; I don't think we have much of a reputation as a pay-to-win title."





Naoyuki Miyashita
Lead game designer

How have you maintained player interest in *Shadowverse*?
We release an expansion every three months. This was a rule, or a pattern that we introduced at the very beginning, and we have stuck with it ever since. Recently we have been introducing cards in between the expansions, both to maintain interest and fix the balance.

Regular expansions and the addition of new cards can threaten the game's balance. How do you monitor this to ensure fairness?
We have a team full of pro level analogue card gamers and esports athletes who continue to test the game on an ongoing basis. And since the game's launch we have monitored actual play data assiduously. If we spot any problems we conduct card adjustments. Going forward we'll also be using AI to test the game.

Have you heard from any other designers who play?
Ever since we released the game other companies have been trying to create digital card games. *Shadowverse* is a household name, and there are others trying to compete with us. On my flight to PAX the guy sitting next to me – a designer from Square Enix – played *Shadowverse* for about 12 hours straight.

What is your favourite memory of working on the game?
Recently, we launched a pro league for *Shadowverse*. It was the first time in Japan that a game was able to pay a monthly salary to its pro players. As someone who came out of the professional arena, having built a game that enables people to make a living is exhilarating.

The game's reputation in Japan is, however, formidable. With a spin-off TV series, and a World Grand Prix, with a million-dollar first prize, *Shadowverse* has become extremely well known. On the Tokyo subway you will inevitably see commuters playing one of two games: *Pokémon Go*, or *Shadowverse*. In the west, however, the game is far less well-known, overshadowed by *Hearthstone*. "When *Shadowverse* originally came out, Japanese card games were more like *Rage Of Bahamut*, and our initial marketing in the west probably didn't do enough to distinguish *Shadowverse* from those types of games," says Cygames' **David McCarthy**. "Another challenge particular to the west is that there is a tendency among core gamers and the media they read to dismiss smartphone games. But I think western gamers have come to understand the game's strengths, to the point where it has a pretty good momentum in the west right now."

That growth has been helped by an unlikely group of supporters in the pro fighting game community. In 2017, Cygames founded its esports team, Cygames Beast, hiring top-flight *Street Fighter* pros Daigo Umehara, Snake Eyez, PR Balrog and Fuudo, who was a *Shadowverse* Grand Master long before gaining Cygames' sponsorship. The game has spread through the FGC, aided by the fact that Cygames sponsored the Evolution tournament in Las Vegas this year. This has helped the game gain a reputation as the competitive connoisseur's CCG of choice. "One reason for its popularity in the FGC is that these guys travel a lot and they can play *Shadowverse* on their smartphones while travelling," Kimura says. "*Shadowverse* can be played anywhere, and it's great for downtime." But Miyashita believes the affiliation runs deeper than mere convenience. "*Shadowverse* is not unrelated to *Street Fighter*," he says. "Fighting games are about reading your opponents, which is something that is crucial in *Shadowverse* play as well. There are definitely crossover skills, and learning how to play well in one arena absolutely benefits competitive play in the other."

Two years after its spectacular launch, *Shadowverse*'s mainstream popularity has remained steady. Expansions, released every three months, have carried its momentum, but the immense scale of the game's popularity continues to bewilder Kimura somewhat. "There was no precedent for any of this when we started," he says. "But somehow we made it all happen." ■

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1 Many of the cards re-used artwork from Cygames' first game *Rage Of Bahamut*, which provides a sense of thematic continuity between the games, even while the mechanics are wildly different.
2 The evolve mechanic elegantly spikes the competitive advantage typically gained by the player who makes the first move in a CCG.
3 Each class leader has a unique story for players to pursue, during which the intricacies of the class' unique abilities and style are taught.
4 Yuwan, leader of the Portalcraft class, was added to the game last year and comes with an inventive ability that activates certain effects when there is an even number of cards in the deck.
5 It is difficult for beginners to build a strong Bloodcraft deck, which typically require the most powerful Gold and Legendary cards for competitive play





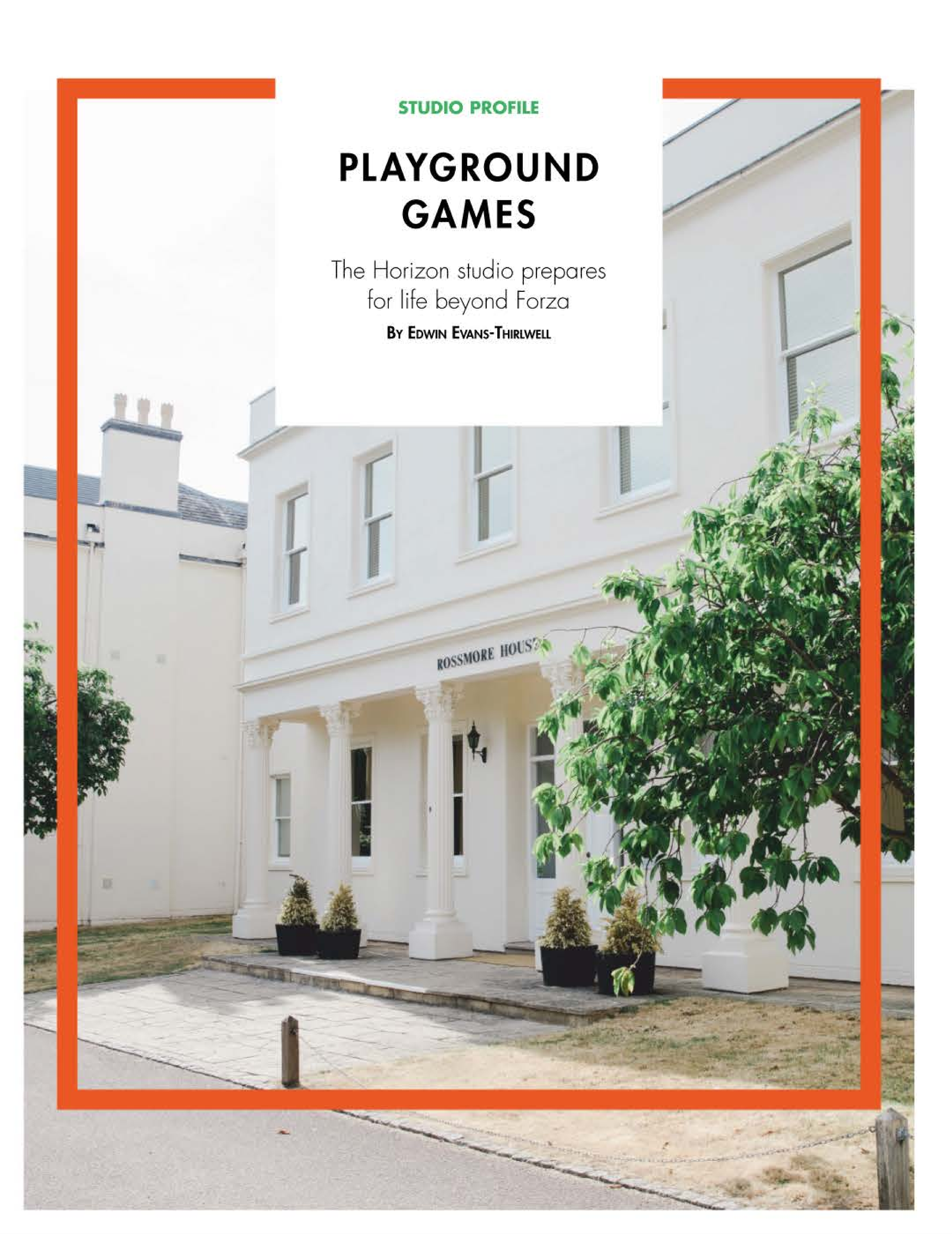
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STUDIO PROFILE

PLAYGROUND GAMES

The Horizon studio prepares for life beyond Forza

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell



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Founded 2010
Employees 200
Key staff Gavin Raeburn (studio director), Trevor Williams (chief operating officer), Ralph Fulton (chief creative officer)
URL www.playground-games.com
Selected softography *Forza Horizon* series
Current projects *Forza Horizon 4*, unannounced open-world project

From its drystone walls to its streaked autumn skies, *Forza Horizon 4* is Playground's most British project, and a timely assertion of cultural identity as the studio becomes part of the Microsoft empire. Playground has always had a special relationship with Microsoft, of course, having worked on *Forza* with franchise creator Turn 10 since its founding in 2010. But it wasn't till the unexpectedly wild success of *Forza Horizon 3* that the idea of an acquisition solidified.

"There were conversations that we'd had from time to time, as kind of inevitably you do when you're in a long-term partnership like that, about taking the next step in our relationship," chief creative officer **Ralph Fulton** tells us during a visit to the studio's elegant white-plastered offices in Leamington Spa. "I tend to resort to romantic allusions when talking about this stuff. I think after *Horizon 3* those conversations became more serious." Playground's owners raised the idea of an acquisition initially with Turn 10's studio head Alan Hartman, but the conversation soon expanded to Xbox boss Phil Spencer and head of Microsoft Studios Matt Booty. "It just made common sense," studio director **Gavin Raeburn** says. "It was like, 'Why hasn't this happened earlier?'"

Additional resources aside, one incentive for Playground was simply ease of access. As perhaps Microsoft's most trusted thirdparty, it had more insight into the publisher's operations than most – the studio was brought in relatively early on plans for Xbox One X, for instance – but there were still frustrating hurdles. "We could talk to other studios, but it had to be filtered, you had to go through certain channels," Raeburn says. "If we wanted to find out about new technology or initiatives that were coming through, there was a time and place for that to happen, and it was usually just behind the curve. Now that we're a firstparty studio, I can pick up the phone and dial out to 343 Studios, The Coalition, Ninja Theory – we can start talking about technology, tools, all of those conversations are easy to have. And hopefully, we can get involved with future planning for consoles and other initiatives." Fulton hints that "even though not a great deal of time has passed since the acquisition – just before E3, end of May – there are already things we've had disclosed to us that we didn't know."

The elephant in the room here is Playground's mysterious non-racing open-world project, rumoured to be a new instalment in Lionhead's troubled *Fable* series. The latter's existence



Playground's office appears in a *FH4* test track, but will never feature in-game. "We thought it might get freaky if people know where we live," CG supervisor Jamie Woods says

"definitely influenced our decision, and Xbox's decision, to take this step together," Fulton comments, adding that "it wouldn't take a genius to work out that they were both with Xbox. The amount of content we're going to be bringing to the family was a crucial factor, there." Ideas for the game began to circulate in 2016, as Playground completed development of *Forza Horizon 3*. While not in itself designed to woo Microsoft, it certainly helped make the case that Playground was a good long-term investment. "We felt we'd achieved success in racing, and wanted to continue that – we love the genre," Raeburn tells us. "But we felt that if we wanted to really make a milestone for the studio, we should look for success in a different genre as well. Again it made sense to partner with Microsoft, and they were really supportive."

"IT'S INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT TO US THAT THE TWO TEAMS DON'T BECOME SILOED OFF FROM EACH OTHER"

The team in question currently shares office space with the *Horizon* staff – "they're tantalisingly close to you right now", Fulton teases – but will move to its own premises a little way up the road next January. With Microsoft's backing, Playground has embarked on a hiring spree: it plans to add around 150 people to the new team, in addition to recruiting for future work on *Forza*. The two teams will maintain a close rapport. "It's incredibly important to us that they don't become siloed off from each other," Fulton says. "I joke about it being five minutes walk [between premises], but that is a significant distance in how it affects working relationships and knowledge sharing. We're going to work really hard to make sure there are still really strong ties between those two teams right across each team, to make sure we are sharing best practices, offering guidance and advice wherever either team can. Because our strength comes from that communication and it will make both teams better. I do think it's a very good thing that, for the first year or so of that team's life, they've been here. They've spent time bonding within the overall culture of Playground."

This emphasis on communication naturally draws upon Playground's experiences collaborating with Turn 10, a studio half a world away. Four *Horizon* games in, the two studios are very much in sync, and if Playground has more of a say these days over *Forza*'s overall direction, the acquisition hasn't created any real upheavals. "People look at it as the point where a lot of things would change," Fulton says. "It was the intention on both sides that that wouldn't be the case, because a lot of the decision-making was predicated on the fact that we're pretty good at what we do, and it would be nuts to change that."

The studios continue to share resources and features between projects, from car handling data to the Drivatars, *Forza Motorsport 5*'s player-generated AI personalities. "We have access to their code base, so sharing is quite easy," Raeburn says. "But we do it in a methodical way in that when we've finished an item of code or work we think would be useful to them, we'll highlight it. They have access to our plans, too, so they know what's up and coming, and our tech leads meet on a ▶

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Raeburn isn't worried about Brexit's possible impact on Playground's expansion, noting that the studio has a strong local talent pool to draw on if overseas hiring becomes more complex. It's hired extensively from UK studios while staffing up for its open-world project

regular basis to talk about technologies and where code can branch and where it can go. So the tech base itself is very tight. There are obviously layers on top of that that are more beneficial to our open-world game than they are to a linear track-based racer, and vice versa. But we take what we can between projects – the cars are shared of course as well."

Lips are naturally sealed about the specifics of Playground's new game, but it appears to be very much an evolution of, rather than a departure from, *Horizon* – a series that is as much about "exploration, discovery and friendships" as racing, in Fulton's words. "The challenge of and the opportunity to make games outside the racing genre is something we've always been interested in," he says. "And the opportunity to make another type of game that is very related to the skillset we've built up in making *Horizon* – it was just too good not to go after." Raeburn puts it a shade more pragmatically. "We didn't want to completely go and have to learn a whole range of new skills. We felt that this allowed us to build upon what we'd learned, and also to gain new skills in one or two areas."

Much of the new game's DNA can, in fact, be traced to a critical act of self-evaluation after the release of the first *Horizon*. "We went and looked at all the critical appraisals, the reviews, sifted them and did word analysis, cluster analysis," Fulton says. "And we also went to the community and analysed forum posts, social media, stuff like that, and we brought everything together and distilled it down to three words – 'fun', 'freedom' and 'beauty', which you maybe saw on the walls upstairs. We've had them there ever since because they're the pillars of *Horizon*, and to those three we've added a fourth that is 'community'." While hardly exotic in themselves, these concepts were essential in helping Playground distinguish itself from the more serious-minded *Motorsport* series, and reaching players unconvinced by racing games in general.

"[We were] trying to think outside our own personal gamer types, if you like, our own play archetypes," Fulton says, "and think more about the true breadth of people who play or who could play *Horizon* games, because I've always felt that *Horizon* had the potential to be a mainstream breakout title, because it's not really about racing. Or at least, and certainly with *Horizon 4*, it doesn't have to be about racing. We think of it as an open-world game almost as much as we do a racing game." This is borne out by the new *Horizon*'s roster of campaigns, each offering its own route to the finish, from simple exploration to photography. "You can win the game by streaming it," Fulton points out. "Nobody will, because nobody just does one thing, but in theory the campaign has been built so that you can pick the thing that you love doing, and the game will recognise that." Art director **Ben Penrose** adds that, "As much as there are people who are incredibly enthusiastic about cars here, me being one of them, there's also a huge passion for videogames of all genres. I think that's something people pick up on in our games, because we're drawing inspiration not just from other racing games but from other open-world games. We're excited to see where those passions lead us with regard to producing something that isn't a racing game."

"WE WERE TRYING TO THINK OUTSIDE OUR OWN PERSONAL GAMER TYPES, IF YOU LIKE, OUR OWN PLAY ARCHETYPES"

That's not to say, of course, that Playground can do without its fresh faces, which range from ex-members of other UK studios such as Rocksteady and Rockstar North to veterans of BioWare and Kojima Productions. "The two that I'm really enjoying working with now are Noel Lukasewich and Scotty Brown from BioWare," Raeburn tells us. "I love making hires from other big studios, because you get to understand how those games were built, you learn new things, you're not working so much in isolation."

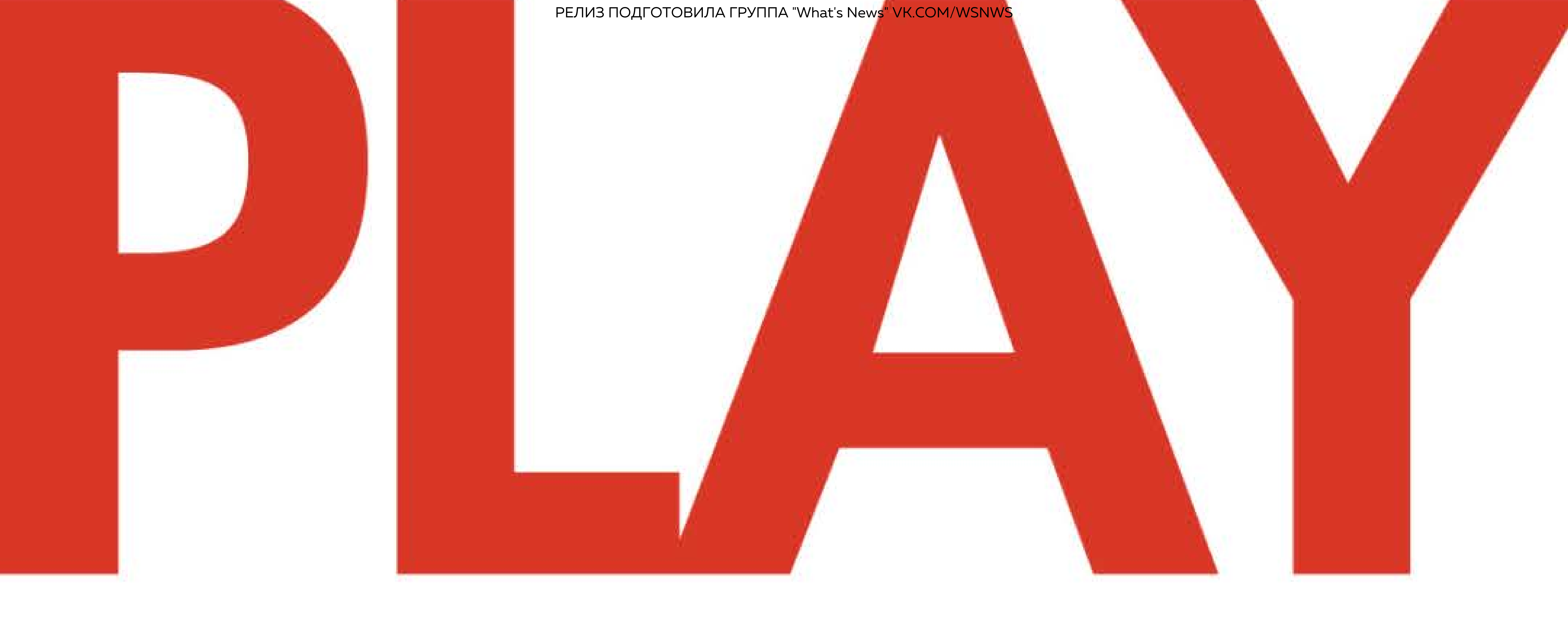
Microsoft is undergoing something of a Britpop invasion: its other recent acquisitions include Compulsion Games, whose *We Happy Few* is a satire of postwar Britishness, and Cambridge's Ninja Theory. If these are perhaps more intriguing additions to the Studios line-up, Playground remains the prize – a proven operator taking its first steps beyond a genre with which it is indelibly associated. "In 2010 we were a 16 person start-up with no track record," Fulton says. "To be in the position we are now, where I think we're one of the best studios in the world making triple-A videogames, and I say that agnostic of genre – I think that's borne out by the calibre of the people who have joined us. I was about to say they'll do great things for us. They're already doing great things for us." ■

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1 Ralph Fulton characterises the evolution of *Forza* as a "broadening in every sense" – not just in terms of features, but in terms of the kinds of players it attracts.
2 Ben Penrose suggests that animation and "secondary motion" is where we'll see the next great strides in racing game technology. "Little, subtle movements, like mud flaps fluttering in the wind."
3 *Forza Horizon 3* attracted some criticism for the flatness of its Australian landscape, which is hardly Playground's fault. There's much more elevation in *Horizon 4*.
4 *Forza Horizon 4* has changed Playground's perception of Britain. "We don't think about it while we're living here, but it's an exotic, attractive place," Ralph Fulton says

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REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Destiny 2: Forsaken PS4
We've had a quick crack at Last Wish – and we'd have cleared it were it not for the autumn review-code rush. But *Forsaken*'s appeal continues to lie in just how much there is to do, even if we're starting to min-max a little and focus our efforts on the most rewarding activities when we log in. A couple of months after an expansion's launch, *Destiny* is normally beginning to feel stale. It is still in the rudest of health.

Dark Souls Remastered Switch
At last. The name is a bit misleading, to be fair: this is more of a port of the 360-era original than the lavish rebuild available elsewhere. The audio's a mess, and whoever remapped the button layout, and then refused to let the player change it back, needs a +15 Zweihander to the face. It is not the most technically proficient version of *Dark Souls*, but it's the only one that fits in our work bag, which makes it by default the best.

Mario Kart 8 Switch
The novel assist features in this Switch re-release – auto-accelerate to keep novice drivers moving, and smart steering that prevents them hurtling off the track – are as much a blessing as a curse. One member of the **Edge** brood thought it was all his own doing, you see, and so assumed he had nothing left to learn. After an extended, parentally enforced break, our champ has finally got his first proper win. Now to take off the training wheels. Wish us luck.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

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Fresh air

They say big ships turn slow – and, similarly, we've learned not to expect established videogame series to change too much between instalments. This is quite the predicament, however, for some of the biggest and longest-running names in games. If all you ever do is offer more of the same, it stands to reason that your audience will only get smaller. Seek to reinvent the wheel, however, and you risk not only failing to draw in new players, but also alienating those you already have.

Happily, this month, we find that change is still possible, even where you least expect it. *Call Of Duty: Black Ops IIII* (p114) is the first game in its series' colossal history to ship without a singleplayer mode – its makers finally acknowledging that too much money was being spent on something that only a portion of players ever bothered with. This bravery has been made easier by changes in the series' host genre, admittedly, though it's intriguing to find that the headline addition, the battle-royale mode Blackout, ends up being one of the less convincing parts of the package.



Just as *Call Of Duty* looks to *PUBG* and *Fortnite*, so *Assassin's Creed* (p108) looks to the likes of BioWare and CD Projekt for its latest instalment. A choice of protagonists, branching dialogue and decisions that have consequences help make *Odyssey* at least different to last year's *Origins*, if only a marginally better game. Still, we'll take it.

These games' longevity makes change hard, but it's their frequency that counts the most against them. When games must launch 12 months apart, the opportunity for change is naturally reduced. Eight years on from the release of its predecessor, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (p104) is finally with us. It is familiar, certainly, but change is everywhere you look. Suffice it to say that the wait has been well worth it.

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS

Red Dead Redemption 2

Our hat, you say? What, this old thing? We're not sure where we got it, honestly. We don't think it's the one we bought at the general store in Strawberry, though we suppose it might be. Perhaps it's the one we lifted from the corpse of that rancher who took exception to us taking a shortcut through his property, and picked his final fight. Most likely, though, we picked it up by accident, retrieving it at random after a dust-up in a bar or a shootout in the streets. We've grown rather fond of it, either way.

Chances are you'll get through a lot of hats in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and not necessarily intentionally. The UI can be a little fussy, especially when it comes to picking things up off the ground after a ruckus. Stand over a fallen foe and you might want to loot their corpse, or pick it up in order to hide it. You might fancy swapping one of your guns for theirs or, yes, nick their hat. That's manageable enough, at least in isolation – but cadavers do tend to pile up when Arthur Morgan's around.

This is a deeply violent game, as any game set in the old west is bound to be, and it's something Rockstar celebrates with film-grain kill-shot cinematics. But it is never relentlessly so. *Red Dead Redemption 2* is full of achievements: it is a visual and technical marvel, well written and vividly performed, rich in complex systems and operating on a level of scope and scale that borders on the absurd. Yet its greatest triumphs come in ways you would not expect from a Rockstar game, and certainly not one with this setting. In amongst the mud, the blood, the grime and the gruel, there is humanity, nuance and heart. The biggest surprise is, simply, how surprising it all is.

It rather sneaks up on us. A few hours in, we notice that nothing is ever playing out quite as we expect. Missions may begin in familiar Rockstar fashion – a trek to a map marker, a cutscene, exposition through NPC chatter on the way to your first objective – but things often turn on a dime. At its mechanical core, this is a game of seemingly limited vocabulary: riding and running, sneaking, fighting and shooting. Yet within that brief lexicon Rockstar finds, again and again, ways to subvert your expectations.

Take the early mission in which Morgan heads out for a spot of fishing with Dutch Van der Linde, the gang's leader, and Hosea Matthews, its brain and conscience. Setting out, you think you know what you're going to get: an introduction to yet another of the systems that rumbles away beneath the open world, and some team-bonding chatter between the gang's top brass. Minutes later, however, your horse is galloping alongside a speeding train to chase down some runaway scumbags. A couple of missions ago, you were on the run from the local law. Now, you're helping them out. With the job complete, Matthews points out that

Developer/publisher Rockstar Games
Format PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Fifty hours in, we're not sure we've ever done quite the same thing twice



there's still time to cast a line. You borrow a boat, catch some bass, and shoot the breeze until the sun sets.

We expect things to escalate in games like this. That stealth will at some point go loud, and friendly chats will turn unpleasant; that just as things seem to be going off without a hitch, some enemy faction will turn up to spoil it. Rockstar knows that, and certainly delivers on it. Yet it also subverts it. Fifty hours in, we're not sure we've ever done quite the same thing twice.

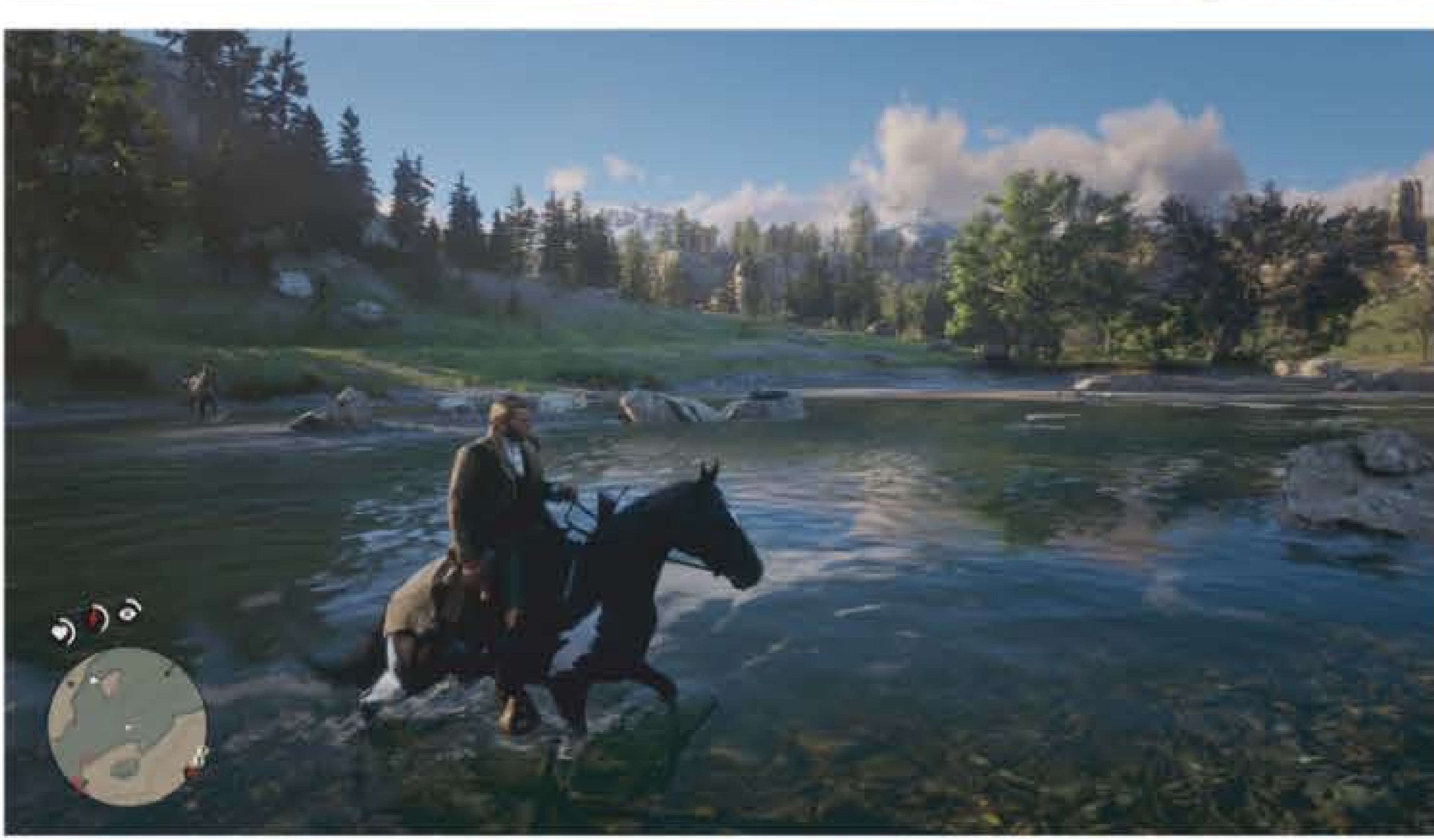
Much of that is a question of context, admittedly. There are plenty of large-scale shootouts, but there's always a different set-up, a different setting, a new, more urgent reason for all the bloodshed. With so vast a world for you to explore, Rockstar knows it has to keep you on the move; broadly speaking, each chapter is set in a different region of the map, the gang's attempt to put down roots inevitably thwarted when the law turns up or a big job goes south. The crew follows suit, packing up and heading out across state lines to another land, another temporary sanctuary, another set of factions to fend (and rip) off.

And, naturally, another set of themes to explore. While firmly pitched as a tale of a gang of outlaws struggling to find their place in a rapidly changing world, late-1800s America was about much more than the slow, sad end of the gunslinger. This was a time of suffrage and racism, a nation still coming to terms with the civil war, the end of slavery, and its treatment of Native Americans. Yes, this is a game about the awkwardness of the encroaching future upon a crew whose way of life is rooted in the past. But it knows its history too – and, unusually for Rockstar, all of it is explored with a sensitive hand. For a studio that has previously preferred to impart its themes by sledgehammer, this is quite a step up.

Gone, by and large, are the caricatures of Rockstar's previous work. Sure, there are some larger-than-life characters, but most of the cast are simply *people*, with problems, dreams and motivations that are firmly rooted in the game's plausible fiction. While the fidelity and animation quality of characters naturally varies in a game of such scale, the main players are lavishly, expressively rendered. The gang are a delight, and the beating heart of the game, giving purpose and urgency to the story beyond Morgan's tale. You will have your favourites, and your really-not-favourites. Together, you will celebrate collective successes. When they hurt – and they do – so will you.

And while the story itself follows a familiar arc – a series of rises and falls in the fortunes of a surrogate family of misfits on the wrong side of the law – it's told with a surprising deftness of touch. It's even sweet at times: at one point Morgan plays matchmaker, helping two young lovebirds from warring old-money families maintain their tryst. His own romantic frailties, ▶

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ABOVE The game's at its best when you're riding with the gang. If you're following an ally to the objective, switching to the dynamic cinematic camera makes your horse follow their route automatically. LEFT See those mountains in the distance? We can't go to them because there's a $500 bounty on our heads there and we spent all our money on some new clothes

BELOW This is a prequel, and Rockstar uses your knowledge of the first game in smart ways. You'll allow yourself a wry smile whenever Marston and Dutch disagree, while eagle eyes will spot the brief appearance of a man who played a vital (and fatal) role in *Red Dead Redemption*



ABOVE Interrogations will often thwart your intentions of staying on the right side of the Honor system. Threats will sometimes be enough, but you'll have to smack most people about a bit to get the info you need



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On approach to the Brathwaite estate, where we hope to sell the family a batch of moonshine confiscated from them after a shootout. Like all good cowboy tales, it's at its best when you're ripping off people that deserve it

meanwhile, are laid bare by the semi-frequent reappearances of an ex he's never quite got over.

The result is that, happily, Morgan, and his brothers and sisters at arms, feel like people – and it's a relief to find that the niggling impression the game's PR campaign gave of an excessively systemic game never quite comes to pass. There's clearly a tremendous amount going on beneath the hood here. But the game it all powers is so naturalistic, and the mechanical abstractions that risk undermining it so well hidden, that it never feels like a game of stat-management. Only on a handful of occasions does the spell break. At one point we are admonished for not having contributed to the camp's coffers for a while. We've just returned from a lengthy spell away from the gang that was enforced by events in the story.

It doesn't happen often. The Honor system responds to just about everything Morgan does, but changes are signalled by a tiny icon that's easily missed or ignored. And in a world where the concept of 'morality' has so many shades of grey, it's going to take a committed roleplayer to fully tip the Honor scales in either direction. We spend most of our journey narrowly on the good-guy side, and given all that Morgan comes up against, we'll happily take that. We're already contemplating a bad-guy playthrough, mind you.

That we are even considering one says a lot. Rockstar's games, for all their sprawl, have never been particularly replayable; once their story components are complete they turn into context-free playgrounds for wanton havoc, and starting again means giving up your attack planes, your properties and supercars and rocket launchers. Yet *RDR2* offers you so many choices – not only at narrative forks in the critical path, but also in how you approach missions and react to people around you – that you're often left wondering what might have been had you leaned the other way.



A LA CARTE

The game may be swimming in systems, but it's up to you how much you engage with them. You can use pelts and hides to craft bigger satchels, yes, but it's a luxury rather than a necessity. You can craft more powerful ammo types at campfires, and improve weaponry at gunsmiths, but the carbine you found a couple of hours into the game will carry you all the way to the end. And the essentials happen naturally, with core stats for Morgan and his horse improving through regular use. We expect some of these systems to come into their own in *Red Dead Online* – indeed, a few feel designed for it, with some of the customisation options feeling a little silly. Did they really have horse dreadlocks in the late 1800s?

And if that doesn't pull you back, the world certainly will. This might not be the biggest videogame landmass we've ever seen – it's up there, though – but it is surely the most alluring. The detail on offer is remarkable: foliage that reacts to your presence, wildlife that scarpers when it hears your horse's hooves from a few hundred yards away, a dramatic dynamic weather system, a perfectly pitched score, and plenty more besides. Yet what really brings it all together is the light. Over every hill is another beautiful vista, around every corner another perfect shot, immaculately lit and framed. Our Share button is in ruins thanks to this, one of the best-looking games we've ever seen.

Going in to *Red Dead Redemption 2*, we knew it was Rockstar's biggest-ever project, worked on by a couple of thousand people at eight studios across the globe. We knew it was its most complex, too, powered by an enormous suite of systems that broke the world down into deeply intricate component parts. Yet we did not expect to be so surprised. It's a game of restraint, but with some brutal sucker punches; the tale of a one-man cowboy army who is nothing without the people around him. It's a game about the fear of the future that reaches astounding new technical heights, and makes Rockstar's previous games look and feel like ancient history. It is a resounding triumph to which there is only one reasonable response – and an appropriate one, too. Hats off.

10

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Post Script

At last, a Rockstar game in which family doesn't mean dysfunction

We've come a long way since Niko Bellic uttered the immortal line, "Roman, I cannot go look at titties with you. I have to do something else." *Red Dead Redemption 2* is not the first Rockstar game to toy with the concept of family, but it is the first to treat it as anything other than a bind. Roman, cousin of *GTAIV* protagonist Bellic, was a quest-giver, a troublemaker, and a companion for off-mission minigames and seedy distractions. The latter felt, at first, like a revelation: an NPC, calling you up, just as a cousin might, and inviting you to do something fun with them, adding depth and flavour to the protagonist and the world around him. Forty hours of seemingly incessant phone calls later, though? If you want to see a boob, Roman, go look in the mirror. Leave us alone.

Across the Rockstar canon, family is misery. Max Payne is eternally tortured by the murder of his wife and daughter. The cold, unloving parents of *Bully*'s Jimmy Hopkins ship their miscreant tearaway off to a strict boarding school. *Grand Theft Auto V*'s three protagonists have their own complicated relationships with their kin. Franklin's mother is a dead drug addict, and he lives with his hectoring stoner aunt. Michael's west-Hollywood offspring are brattish, superficial and entitled, and his wife despises him. Trevor's father abandoned him at a shopping mall the kid would later burn down in retribution, and died when Trevor was ten. Family, as Rockstar would tell it, will cause you nothing but pain.

Until now, that is. Arthur Morgan may not have any blood relatives that we know of, but he certainly has kin, and the Van der Linde gang is the closest thing Rockstar has ever made to what could even vaguely be described as a happy family. Led, through thick and thin, by eponymous leader Dutch, this ragtag band of ne'er-do-wells treat each other as Dutch treats them: with respect, love and care (and where appropriate, a firm hand).

They provide the game with much of its emotional impact. Big missions are celebrated with camp parties, where crates of beer and whiskey are dotted about and the crew sing songs and dance by firelight. It will take a cold heart indeed for any player not to be stung by some of the cruelties that are visited on certain members of the family as the story progresses. They're a tremendous asset to storytelling, particularly of the Rockstar kind. The first *Red Dead Redemption*, like many other Rockstar games, spent a little too much of its runtime making you do jobs for objectionable, even evil people. Here, while you'll still work for questionable people out in the world, many of the game's mainline missions have you working directly with a fellow gang member. And those that don't are ultimately intended to be for the gang's collective benefit, as they seek the big payday that will let them leave their troubles behind for good.

> People of colour, women, foreigners and even members of rival gangs are welcomed into the fold



They are also a very convenient device, allowing Rockstar to avoid any accusations of lazy typecasting or outdated thinking. The America of the late 19th century is, after all, a dangerous place to go given modern-day attitudes to diversity and equality. But, as Van der Linde himself puts it in the game's prologue after rescuing a vulnerable abused woman, Sadie Adler, from the clutches of the O'Driscoll gang, "We're bad men. But we ain't them." He runs a tight ship and a respectful one, and this means his gang can take on people who would be treated very differently out in the world. People of colour, women, foreigners and even members of rival gangs are welcomed into the fold. Each plays a vital role around camp – Adler, who is arguably the group's second-biggest badass after Morgan, in particular – and is treated as a peer. It might stretch the bounds of believability at times, but means Rockstar can explore some of the setting's more awkward themes with a modern, progressive eye.

The gang's greatest contribution to the game, however, is a mechanical one. The enduring problem at the core of all open-world games is that, however many kinds of activity and distractions they contain, they all fall into two camps: things that count, and things that don't. Here, however, the gang is the focus of everything you do. Every animal you hunt is food for the camp to eat; if it's a clean kill you might want to use the pelt for crafting, but if you don't, the posse can sell it on. Every corpse, bank and wardrobe looted is money for the collective's coffers, which improves not only the mood about the place but Arthur's quality of life in the field. Every penny earned, through whatever means, has the potential of making your surrogate family's difficult life a little bit better.

Above all, though, they feel like a gang, and a family, of people you care about, rather than fully voiced XP bars. This is helped greatly by the way their attitude towards you is affected not only by your actions, but their own circumstances. We've always been cordial with Karen, the buxom blonde who played a fine sap at an early-game bank job. Yet she's frequently brutally mean towards us, simply because we make the mistake of talking to her after she's argued with someone else. Conversations with the crew may not run as deep as you'd like – you get one line of dialogue out of them each time before Arthur bids them adieu – but once you grow accustomed to it, you realise they tend to say precisely what they need to, and nothing more. It's a smart repurposing of the concept of family, something with which Rockstar has for so long struggled to implement in a positive way. And even better, there isn't a smartphone in sight. ■

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Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A staid but elegant epic that might comfortably exceed 100 hours of playtime, depending on your tolerance for grinding, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* is often at its best when it leaves things out. Among its quieter feats is Exploration mode, which sees you tackling the same quests with a little less guidance, finding your way to the goal using a set of rough directions. Styling this as "exploration" is overselling things somewhat – the game's map has all regions already marked on it, and you're encouraged to summon your eagle, Ikaros, to lay down waypoints (and tag nearby foes or treasures) when you're close. Still, it's a welcome incentive to become intimate with architecture and geography that, in prior *Creeds*, were a little too easy to treat as background static. And 5th century BCE Greece is certainly worth the extra attention, from the fluted, curtained temples that top each island to the marks of civic life and industry that animate its villages and cities.

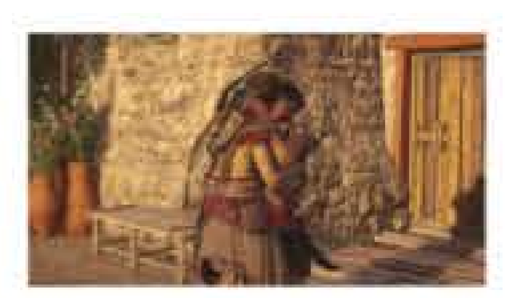
The game casts you as either Kassandra or Alexios, two children of Sparta thrown into exile. Whoever you pick, you'll begin the game as a young but battle-scarred mercenary on the isle of Kefalonia, which serves as a tutorial area. In short order, a brush with a masked cult propels you to the mainland and beyond, where you'll help Athens and Sparta contest ownership of regions – a question of destroying soldiers and resources until you're in a position to initiate a clash between armies – while searching for your parents.

As hardened killers, Alexios and Kassandra are endowed with a certain ruthlessness from the off. This is vital in a game which, its newfound taste for pacifist outcomes notwithstanding, generally defaults to good old murdering and looting. Both protagonists are fine company, thanks to spirited voice acting and writing that strikes a deft balance of darkness and humour, and you'll encounter some vivid personalities as you roam, from con-men posing as creatures from myth to classical celebrities such as Sokrates and Perikles. Their stories often, however, feel like a justification for a campaign framework that consists of checking off regions and levelling up. *Origins* had a similarly workmanlike air, but sparked intrigue by alternating between the perspectives of a husband and a wife, each with their own, semi-distinct agenda. *Odyssey* has an equivalent for this – essentially, a familial redemption story in the vein of Star Wars – but it's much less engrossing.

Where Exploration Mode owes something to *Breath Of The Wild*'s lightly instrumentalised countryside, *Odyssey*'s missions learn from BioWare, with a branching dialogue system and multiple quest outcomes. Some of the better examples border on the transformative, though most of them rest atop the familiar Ubiworld structuring principle of the fortified outpost. One quest sees you ridding a healing bath of some sacred snakes – slaughtering the creatures will upset local clerics, but

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Quebec)
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now

It's lifted by the relative wit and intelligence of its quest design, and by the Exploration mode



ATHENS WITH BENEFITS
Odyssey is the first *Assassin's Creed* to let you seduce and sleep with NPCs, but don't expect anything either as torrid or sentimental as in *Mass Effect* or *Dragon Age*. Mostly, the prospect is played for laughs, and while you can take certain partners with you on your voyages (as lieutenants aboard your ship, perhaps), there's no real ongoing relationship to manage. Among the eligible sorts you'll encounter (as either gender) are a hirsute healer who'll ask you to murder his grandmother before falling in to your arms, and an energetic old lady whose husband is struggling to keep up with her appetites. The sex itself is decorously handled – think discreet fades to black, rather than *Mass Effect*'s vein of shampoo-commercial softcore.

there's another solution hidden away in one character's optional patter. A little later, you're sent to fetch a physician from a fortress to save a dying man. Your mark, however, insists on treating one of his own patients first. You might agree to wait, whereupon you'll be asked to recover a surgical instrument from elsewhere in the (well-guarded) fortress, or knife the patient to hurry things along. Or you could knock your quarry out and throw him over your shoulder, which entails trying to escape the area while being too encumbered to climb.

Few of these choices have lasting repercussions. Key characters will usually find ways to forgive you if you behave violently, which makes dialogue branches more a question of striking the preferred tone than changing the plot. All the same, there's a richness and an excitement to *Odyssey*'s quest design that *Assassin's Creed*'s waypoint-ridden worlds have been crying out for, and if many of your decisions don't leave a mark, there are enough that do to keep you on your toes. Allow a plague sufferer to escape the purge, for example, and you may find nearby towns less picturesque on subsequent visits.

You're presented early on with your very own, upgradeable war trireme and a horse (which teleports to your side at a whistle), and synchronisation points allow for fast travel across a world roughly twice the size of *Origins'* North Africa. Your forays are checked, however, by the return of *Origins'* levelling system, each region having its recommended level. As in *Origins*, this also tips the emphasis towards brawling when fighting above your level, because stealthy attacks no longer guarantee a kill: plunge blade-first onto a comparatively seasoned guard and you'll have to settle for a chunk of health bar.

Fortunately, the game's melee combat is much improved, if straightforward, split between various weapon categories and backed up by a decadent suite of upgradeable abilities. Kassandra and Alexios can't block but are adept at dodging and countering, with a generous parry window and a slow-mo trait that triggers when you narrowly avoid damage. The three unlock trees borrow copiously from other Ubisoft games, but the ability to respec characters without penalty means you are better able to enjoy the breadth of ideas in play. The combat shines brightest when duelling other mercenaries.

Odyssey was developed alongside *Origins* and thus isn't so much a sequel as a parallel meditation on the same ideas – hence its lack of real surprise. It also commits a few of the same sins: in particular, the deluge of gear drops feels vaguely insulting, conditioning the player to lust after items exclusive to the in-game store. It's lifted, however, by the relative wit and intelligence of its quest design, and the delicate notes of uncertainty and curiosity introduced by Exploration mode. The series would do well to build on the latter feature, if its landscapes are to be as involving as they are grand. **7**

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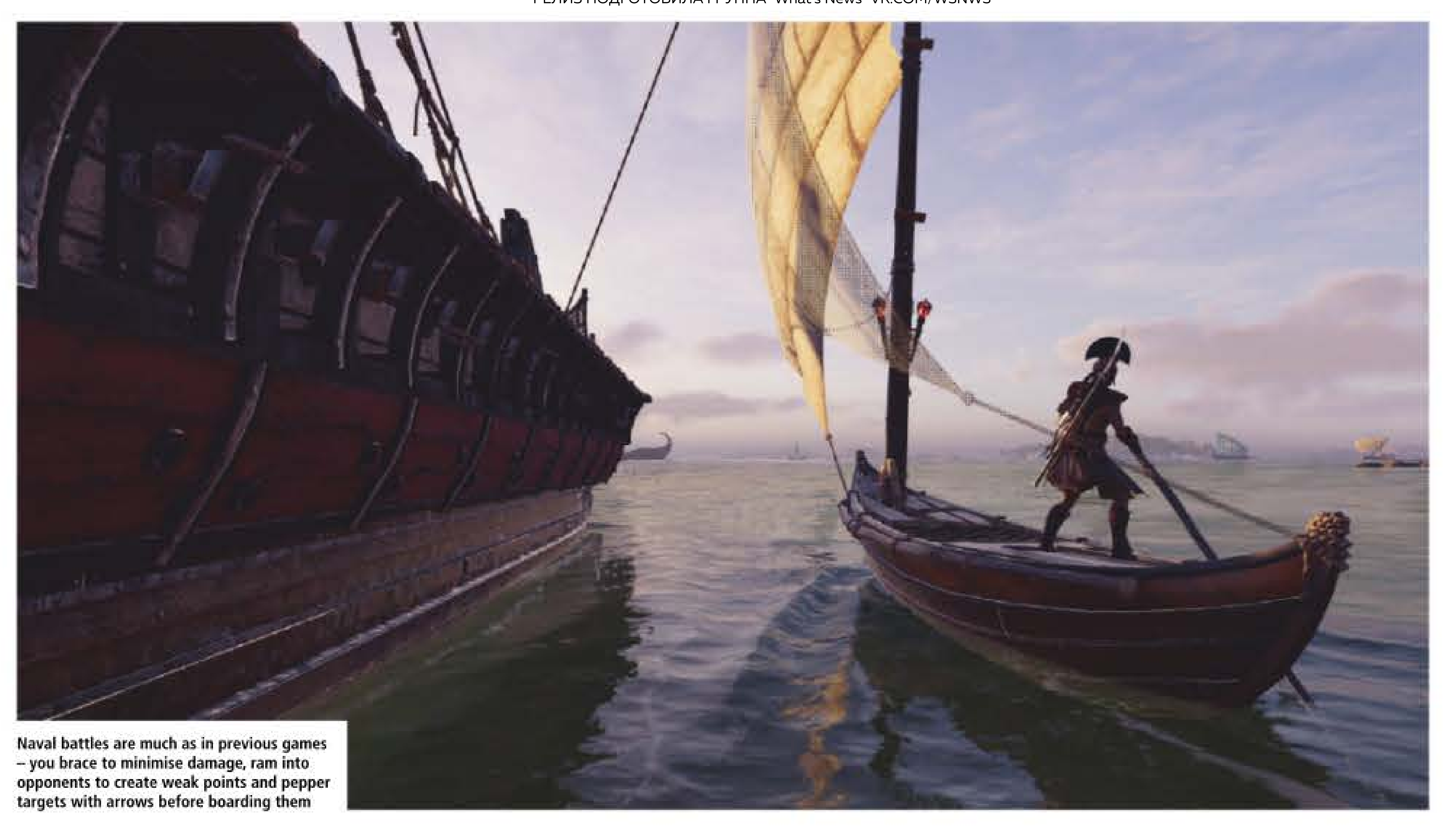
RIGHT Con artists aside, there are plenty of genuine mythical monstrosities in *Odyssey*, most found on more remote islands or in the depths of cave systems. **BELOW** Even minor towns are enlivened by the game's range of incidental NPC animations. The first *Assassin's Creed*'s trudging crowds are a distant memory. **MAIN** The story often sees you pursuing scattered leads in the form of three or more 'support' quests to reach the next major plot point





ABOVE Each of the towns contains a quest board that is periodically refreshed with time-limited activities – a game-as-service element that thankfully has little impact on quests in the mainline story





Naval battles are much as in previous games – you brace to minimise damage, ram into opponents to create weak points and pepper targets with arrows before boarding them

Post Script

How eagles, towers and photo editors point to a kinder, less suffocating open world

One *Assassin's Creed* staple Ubisoft has sought to downplay in recent years is the synchronisation tower. Once upon a time, you'd scale these to clear the map's fog of war and highlight nearby missions on the HUD, in a recurrent act of conquest by which 'living, breathing' exoticised worlds are revealed for piles of disposable resources. Synchronisation points still exist in *Odyssey*, but they are relatively modest in stature and now serve only as fast-travel points that gradually enhance the capabilities of your eagle ally, Ikaros.

Their map-revealing properties aside, the old towers were a means of rising above a realm of exhausting busywork in which you were under constant surveillance. While standing on a synchronisation point in, say, *Assassin's Creed II*, you are temporarily free of the swirling, watchful NPC crowds, the enveloping seethe of icons and waypoints, the contextual HUD's invitations to steal from or kill the people at your elbow. The towers were, in a way, attempts to transcend the game's structure from within – according to series co-creator Patrice Désilets, they were inspired by a wish to blur the divide between avatar and player in the act of escaping upward.

As in *Origins*, *Odyssey*'s eagle companion is effectively the gateway to an entirely different game, a leisurely unwinding of the landscape in a soundless calm. The eagle is technically just a tactical aid through which to size up an area's layout and highlight enemies, but you can fly any distance from your character with no penalty, and in a world newly encumbered with levelling thresholds, the temptation to head for the horizon is hard to resist.

With no missions to distract you, you're free to create your own fun: working out the exact height at which the game ceases to render pedestrians or pots, for example. The eagle becomes a curious means of operating upon the simulation, peeling apart layers of diegesis and mimesis. It also makes more obvious *Odyssey*'s deft compromises between archaeology and game design, the shoring of the ruins of Korinth, Athens and Argos against the familiar Ubiworld framework of fortified tactical puzzle-boxes. Many of Ubisoft's other open-world games offer their own equivalents. *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* has its drones, for example – a more limited and clinical instrument of reconnaissance, but one whose very limitations can be provocative. Videogame architecture website Heterotopias has devoted a photograph essay to the simulated breakdown of the drone feed at maximum range, turning this into a visual critique of the game's imperialist tendencies.

What the eagle does for *Odyssey* at the level of city walls and mountain ranges, the game's photo editor does at the level of the street corner. Stripping away the UI, it allows you to zoom, tilt and edit the view as you see fit – a reprieve from the bombardment of cues, resource indicators and objective markers, and an opportunity to investigate details that the game's primary verbs (killing people or robbing them) encourage you to disregard. It makes the population seem a little more human. Townsfolk typically look toward the player's character en masse as you approach, like possessed villagers in some backwoods '60s horror film. Care of the photo editor, you are able to watch them without being stared at in turn, picking up on details like the worn clay bowl held in a guard captain's fingers.

Detaching camera from player avatar also helps reveal Kassandra and Alexios for the sleepless predators they are, each standing by default with one foot forward, torsos tilted aggressively, always on the brink of launching themselves up a wall or into a combo. These alternative ways of seeing the world suggest a series that is, on some level, straining to overcome the deadening brutality of its own core mechanisms, and find other ways of engaging with, and living within, the majestic landscapes it creates for you. ■

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Starlink: Battle For Atlas

For a game predicated on playing with toy spaceships, *Starlink: Battle For Atlas* can feel like bloody hard work at times. As part of a plucky group of pilots, your job is to protect the Atlas star system from an ever-growing force known as the Forgotten Legion, swooping down onto planets to clear out enemies before destroying the alien motherships that produce them. Every so often there are signs of life in this toys-to-life space RPG. Mostly, however, it feels superficial, as you hover over the surface of planets without ever setting foot on them, performing repetitive fetch quests on endless, tedious clean-up duty. Hero? We feel more like a rocket-powered custodian.

It's heartbreaking, as there's no shortage of spirit in the concept of *Starlink*. This is a toys-to-life game in spite of the very public death of the genre – and with plenty of original ideas to boot. *Starlink*'s modular toys appear in the game when connected to a controller mount: first you snap on your pilot, then clip a starship over the top, attach your choice of wings and weaponry, and away you go. This approach to toys-to-life feels wonderfully fresh – not least because the high-quality toys themselves are so much more than static statues, and great fun to play with without the digital busywork attached. These are Transformers with perks.

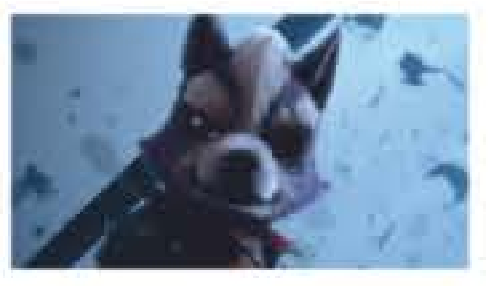
Indeed, *Starlink*'s standout features are undoubtedly its movement and combat. It feels fantastic to cut about in even the most improbable ship creations (we spend an enjoyable hour or so in a ridiculous triple-winged monstrosity). Dodges, barrel rolls, loop-de-loops and bunny hops make the basic act of navigating the seamless star system a joy. And although the majority of Legion enemies are meaningless cannon fodder, blasting them away can be exhilarating. The crunchy impact of the Iron Fist shotgun is enormously satisfying, as is turning yourself into a fiery projectile with the Meteor Mk 2.

But the best results come from elemental combos. With the Flamethrower and Frost Barrage, you can send foes into thermal shock. Siege weapons offer more options: our go-to loadout involves using the Vortex to trap enemies in a gravity well before turning it into a ball of flame with the Volcano gatling gun. We can't always rely on it – Crush enemies are immune to the effects of gravity weapons, for instance, and we've even seen some foes strengthen themselves by triggering a Frost Vortex with their weapons before we can light it up. Efficient shooting, then, has us rebuilding our toy starship on the fly to keep up in tougher battles. Far from fiddly, for the most part, the chunky toys make interacting with *Starlink* a novel pleasure.

Crucially, they provide a physical, personal link to an in-game world that somehow feels more plasticky than the kit. Take away the toys, and much of the spirit is lost. Unfortunately, it's advantageous to ditch them. If you want the full complement of ships and weapons – and you will if you're hoping to enjoy yourself, as each ship functions as an extra life, and having the right weapon to hand is far more convenient than tracking down an elemental canister – it will cost you. Doubtless the well-made toys will be worth the extra expense for collectors. But it's far more practical to shell out for the (still eye-wateringly pricey) complete digital edition, switching parts via the menu. A game over means calling in a new ship: this is easy to do digitally, but an absolute chore with the toys. And if you only own a couple of ships, you'll have to respawn literal light years away from a fight and chug all the way back to try again. Basic design oversights like these mean playing *Starlink* feels less like the toys-or-no-toys choice it's presented as. Good intentions are there; the execution is not.

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Toronto)
Format PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

For the most part, the chunky toys make interacting with Starlink a novel pleasure



FOR FOX SAKE
Ubisoft's Nintendo connection has come up trumps again. It's not quite accurate to call Fox McCloud's Switch-exclusive *Starlink* appearance a cameo – he and the Star Fox crew have a mini-campaign all of their own. In it, you must chase down Wolf across the galaxy in a series of missions that frequently outclass those in the main story. Every character is faithfully written and acted, Fox's interactions with the main cast provide a welcome bit of fun to a lacklustre script, and calling in backup for Fox's super ability even plays the Corneria theme. All told, it's one of the best *Star Fox* games in a long time, and makes *Starlink* well worth a punt for the superfans.

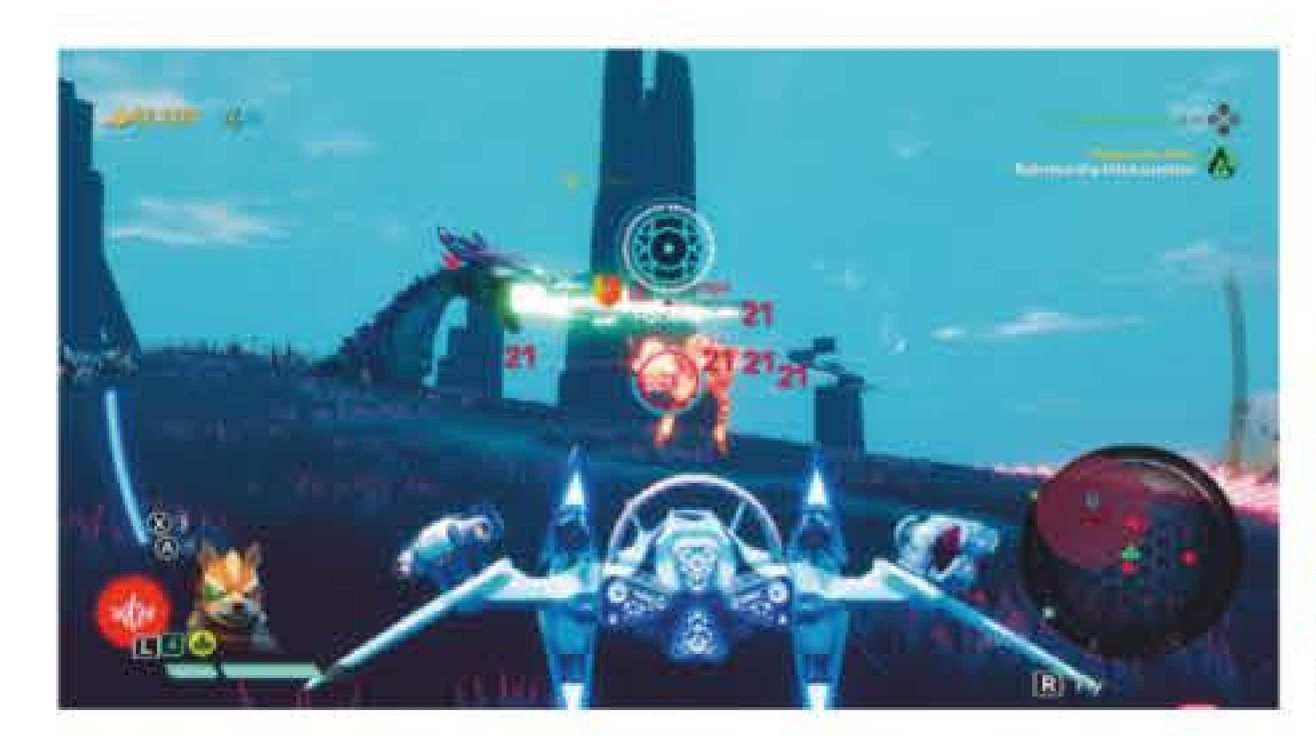
Likewise, the basic structure of *Starlink* itself. The loop goes like this: take down Extractors to track down huge, mecha-bug Primes. Defeat enough Primes, and you weaken their origin, the huge Dreadnought ships out in space. Parts of this loop are exciting. Prime fights are brilliant, requiring you to whizz through the many legs of the robot to get at its weak spots, which it tries to hide by sheepishly shuffling in circles. Dreadnoughts are a true test of your dogfighting skills and overall power level. Extractors are less inspired, static towers where you shoot red orbs with inflated health bars while shaking off mobs. The whole process soon becomes prescriptive. With Legion forces always returning, nagging percentage bars on each planet ticking up again as the same Dreadnoughts keep reappearing well into the endgame, patience very quickly wears thin.

Not least because we find it almost impossible to care about Atlas, or any of the characters. The planets mostly feel like lifeless colonisation spheres, as you are made to construct your own expensive resource-mining structures or run dull errands to raise your alliance levels with the inhabitants. Meanwhile, about 80 per cent of the cast is either forgettable (poster boy Mason) or insufferable (vlogging berk Levi), and the story so barebones that we suspect the cutscene budget must have run out early. Indeed, the emotional turning point halfway through the campaign prompts disbelieving laughter, as we are asked to be sad about a character we barely know from Adam. The target audience may skew younger, but this is patronising stuff.

Elsewhere, this isn't the case: *Starlink* has meaningfully improved on the fundamentals of toys-to-life, and deserves to be commended for it, even if not all its mechanical bits and pieces fit together perfectly. But without a compelling justification or reward for your heroism, it's hard to see why we should bother battling the busywork for Atlas at all. It's a shame that, for all those nifty custom USB sockets, there's no real connection to be found here.

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ABOVE Warden Spires are a good source of equippable mods for your ships and weapons. You'll have to solve puzzles with elemental weapons to get at them, but we wish they were more varied: we see this iteration a lot





TOP During one Drake hacking mission, there's a rare moment of chaos as the local wildlife takes fiery exception to both our and the Outlaws' presence. When *Starlink*'s systems come together, the results can be hugely surprising.
MAIN Visually, planets are different: Haven is lush and beautiful, Tundria a snowy waste, and Vylus a rotten, spore-ridden wonderland. But they all host the same tedious missions, and so end up feeling too similar.
RIGHT The spectacular final third of the Prime fight forces you to take to the air for your final blows. It's at this point a triumphant version of the main theme kicks in – our compliments to *Starlink*'s composer

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS

Call Of Duty: Black Ops IIII

There's a subversive thrill to beating 99 *Call Of Duty* players without having to shoot them all. How rebellious it feels to pad around, being careful about the noises you make. Pausing for a moment with an enemy lined up in your iron sights, then thinking better of it. Adopting these standard battle-royale tactics in *Call Of Duty* – *Call Of Duty*, for goodness' sake, where the twitchiest players have ruled for aeons – feels like driving a motorbike through the grounds of your old school and jumping it into the swimming pool. Suddenly you're free of the old tyranny, and it's now the slayers of old who fail to adjust, and expire in the opening seconds.

In that way, *Black Ops IIII*'s reinvention as a normcore-wearing, fidget-spinner-twiddling competitor to youth favourites *PUBG* and *Fortnite* works well. Mechanical polish has been patently lacking in battle royale for as long as the genre existed, so naturally Treyarch's signature flourishes in player animation and inherently *right* weapon behaviour was going to make an impact. Its new Blackout mode, which attempts to replace the traditional singleplayer campaign with a 100-player last-one-standing mode, works immediately by doing all the things battle-royale games seem to forsake: proper player animation, reliable hitboxes, consistent surfaces and smooth control. Then again, if mechanical finesse was all that important to battle-royale players in the first place, would *PUBG* have found the audience it did?

The answer, you suspect as you smash feet-first through a waist-high window and seamlessly begin a gunfight, is that polish isn't the point in battle royale. Being first is. Blackout can't offer the same agoraphobic thrill you felt the first time you explored Erangel by Dacia. Its world map, though far bigger than any previous *COD* multiplayer arena, doesn't offer any particular geographical curiosity, because you're used to this scale by now. There's a lot to be said for the refined gunplay, and the powerup-laden loot system, but their effect is that of an appreciative nod, not an all-nighter.

After several hours looking for the heart of *Black Ops IIII* in Blackout and returning empty-handed, it's a turn-up for the books to discover that it's the old stalwarts, the multiplayer and Zombies modes, where Treyarch's latest best defines itself. Here, in the domains of half-second twitch-duels, gathering dog-tags in chokepoint-laden warzones, and initiating arcane rituals with a tap of X amid waves of undead, the game reassures you that although the solo campaign is gone, the series' identity has not.

Much to the hardcore community's chagrin, Specialists make a return in multiplayer. That's not to say it's suddenly become a hero shooter as well as a battle-royale game – yes, there are character abilities, but they're subtle by *COD*'s standards. Ruin, perhaps

Developer Treyarch
Publisher Activision
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Who knows how we got here, but Zombies is the most compelling reason to buy a Call Of Duty game in 2018



FINITE WARFARE
Where next for the FPS megabrand? You could be forgiven for taking *Black Ops IIII* as a statement of Activision's intent to ape the multiplayer flavour of the month with each subsequent release, but in truth Sledgehammer and Infinity Ward may very well be hard at work on more traditional offerings. Treyarch told media in 2018 that it had "no idea" of its stablemates' creative direction for future games, and that Blackout mode is "quintessentially *Black Ops*" and thus couldn't have found a home in any other of *COD*'s progeny. The game's commercial performance will be the biggest clue as to what next year's *COD* comprises, as will the popularity of battle royales as a whole.

portentously named, has a grapple-gun at his disposal, and you *will* be killed by someone who has an apparently superhuman command of its traversal possibilities within 15 minutes. However, that's the exception to the rule. This isn't a wall-running, backflipping shooter. Abilities don't turn the fight into a cartoon. You just might end up getting mauled by Nomad's attack dog every once in a while, that's all.

And if both kills and deaths felt a bit cheap in those floaty, hyperactive series entrants prior to *WWII*'s grounded fights where wall-runs were ubiquitous, staying alive has renewed meaning in Heist mode. Clearly taking its cues from *Payday 2* and *CS: GO*, it's a rush to a central cash-stuffed suitcase, then a rush to an extraction point in permadeath fashion. As a vessel for dramatic tension and a palate cleanser after five rounds of mindless Kill Confirmed, it's equally adept. There's esports potential in Heist to which Treyarch's is clearly not oblivious, evidenced by several significant betas and 'hardcore' variants of each mode.

Elsewhere, the song remains the same: twitch-shooting 6v6 brawls across 14 multiplayer maps that pay a more than passing nod to previous games and their asset libraries, and usual suspects Hardpoint, Free-For-All, Domination and Control waiting for you to get bored of more cerebral modes such as the aforementioned Heist and Search And Destroy. If there's a central idea bringing together all these disparate activities it's well hidden, but the simple gratification is as moreish as it ever was.

Perhaps most surprisingly of all, it's Zombies mode that feels the most essential. What began life as a throwaway diversion has somehow become a bona fide stand-in for traditional six-hour campaigns, and now a highly suspect historical document too thanks to *Black Ops IIII*'s own visions of the RMS Titanic, Ancient Rome and Alcatraz (again). These three co-op survival maps are really the only areas of the game and its disparate modes which have the kind of personality you'd expect from such a towering monolith of an IP. The inherent silliness of sprinting around a hundred-year-old ocean liner with a futuristic assault rifle in one hand and the Scepter Of Ra in the other goes a long way to make up for Blackout's charisma vacuum, and the same must be said for shooting exploding tigers in a gladiatorial arena somewhere in ancient Rome.

Who knows how we got here, but Zombies is the most compelling reason to buy a *COD* game in 2018. What's apparent from the series' first release not to feature a singleplayer narrative component is that those experiences provided more than six hours of drone-cam cutscenes and throwing grenades back at mercs. They were the contextual anchor of each game, and you can't help but feel that context's absence here. **7**

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS



LEFT All vehicles in Blackout, from quad bikes to trucks to choppers, are impressively refined in their behaviour. *Halo*'s twin-stick vehicular controls are alive and well thanks to *Black Ops IIII*. MAIN There's a whiff of the 'reimagined' if you're feeling charitable, or 'rehashed' if you're not, to many maps. The RMS Titanic's exterior looks a lot like that of the USS Texas in *COD:WWII*. BOTTOM The jamboree of second-guessing and double-bluffing in close-quarters Heist maps adds a thrilling new wrinkle to multiplayer, but constant communication between teammates is essential





ABOVE This daring experiment yielded vital field information: yes, this drop can be survived. And yes, the driver will almost certainly panic upon receiving the passenger and drive headlong into the nearest wall



РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS

Fist Of The North Star: Lost Paradise

Developer/publisher Sega (CS1)
Format PS4
Release Out now

A taciturn hero using his considerable fighting powers for good in a lawless world – could there be a better choice to develop a *Fist Of The North Star* game than the *Yakuza* team? You'll see quite a bit of Kazuma Kiryu in protagonist Kenshiro, though since Buronson and Tetsuo Hara's manga predates *Yakuza* by a good couple of decades, it's probably more accurate to say there's always been something of Kenshiro in Kiryu. Naturally, there are a few key differences. Despite the hostess bars, the neon signs and the general whiff of testosterone, this post-apocalyptic world – a kind of manga Mad Max – is no Kamurocho. And while Kiryu's moral code prevented him, at least in theory, from killing others, Kenshiro has no such qualms. Using the martial art of Hokuto Shinken, he applies a kind of violent acupressure to his enemies, deploying a variety of techniques that make his opponents' limbs and heads explode in geysers of blood.

Otherwise, *Lost Paradise* is pretty much exactly what you'd expect a *Fist Of The North Star* game developed by the *Yakuza* team to feel like. Which is to say it's essentially a *Yakuza* spin-off, right down to Takaya Kuroda, Kiryu's voice actor, who plays Kenshiro here. At least, that's assuming you stick with the Japanese dub and subs: an English-language option is available, though for some reason once you've made your choice it won't let you switch between the two. It's just one of a number of odd little quirks that make *Lost Paradise* feel strangely old-fashioned. Indeed, it's built upon the foundations of *Yakuza 0*, rather than the newer Dragon Engine – yet its rhythms and structure make it feel like even more of a throwback. For better and worse, it often reminds us of a late-era PS2 game.

The setting is certainly part of it. Compared to Kamurocho, the central hub of Eden is sparse: there are only a handful of stalls, stores and leisure facilities to visit, though that's arguably in keeping with the plot's relative single-mindedness. You'll also notice it in the oddly rigid feel of it all: Kenshiro basically looks like a walking piece of vacuum-packed steak, and frequently moves like one, too. And when you get a buggy to drive around the wasteland beyond Eden's boundaries, you shouldn't expect anything like Avalanche's *Mad Max*. It's a throwaway side dish compared to *Lost Paradise*'s main course of claret-soaked hand-to-hand combat.

For a while it seems as if your Square and Triangle buttons are going to take quite the beating – though the benefit of following two Omega Force games is that these brawls are, relatively speaking, a model of variety. In any case, your Circle button steadily becomes the MVP. In *Yakuza* parlance, Kenshiro is capable of pulling off Heat moves with little effort: sometimes a single punch, or even a preparatory flex, is enough for him to walk up to an enemy and launch an instakill attack.

Lost Paradise is very funny throughout, tapping into a rich seam of deadpan humour



ALCOHOLIDAY
Yakuza Studio's finely honed knack for designing gently stressful, weirdly compulsive asides about drinking is in full evidence. When Kenshiro incurs a huge debt, he's invited to start paying it off by working as the manager of a hostess bar. If you played *Yakuza 0* you'll have an idea of what to expect: sit the right girls next to the right punters and use their special techniques to keep your clients drinking (and thus paying out) for longer. A bartender job, meanwhile, requires you to variously hold the DualShock vertically and give it a hearty shake, circle your thumb over the face buttons to chip huge ice blocks into whiskey tumbler-sized balls, or to rapidly spin the right stick to mix one of several creatively named beverages. Inebriation Of Souls, madam?

Depending on when and where you press the button, a cutscene of a Hokuto technique will begin, with timed button-presses boosting its effectiveness. After several hours, you can cut out the middleman, with one tap of Circle producing another prompt. Time it right, and you'll kill your opponent without breaking your flow. It's a system that prizes efficiency as much as variety, in other words: though you'll earn bonuses for mixing up your finishers, taking out a group quickly and without taking damage is the easiest way to that initially elusive S++ rank. You can tip the scales further in your favour with unlockable talismans, selected via the D-pad. A few of these are hilariously unfair – though there's a lengthy cooldown on them, even once fully upgraded.

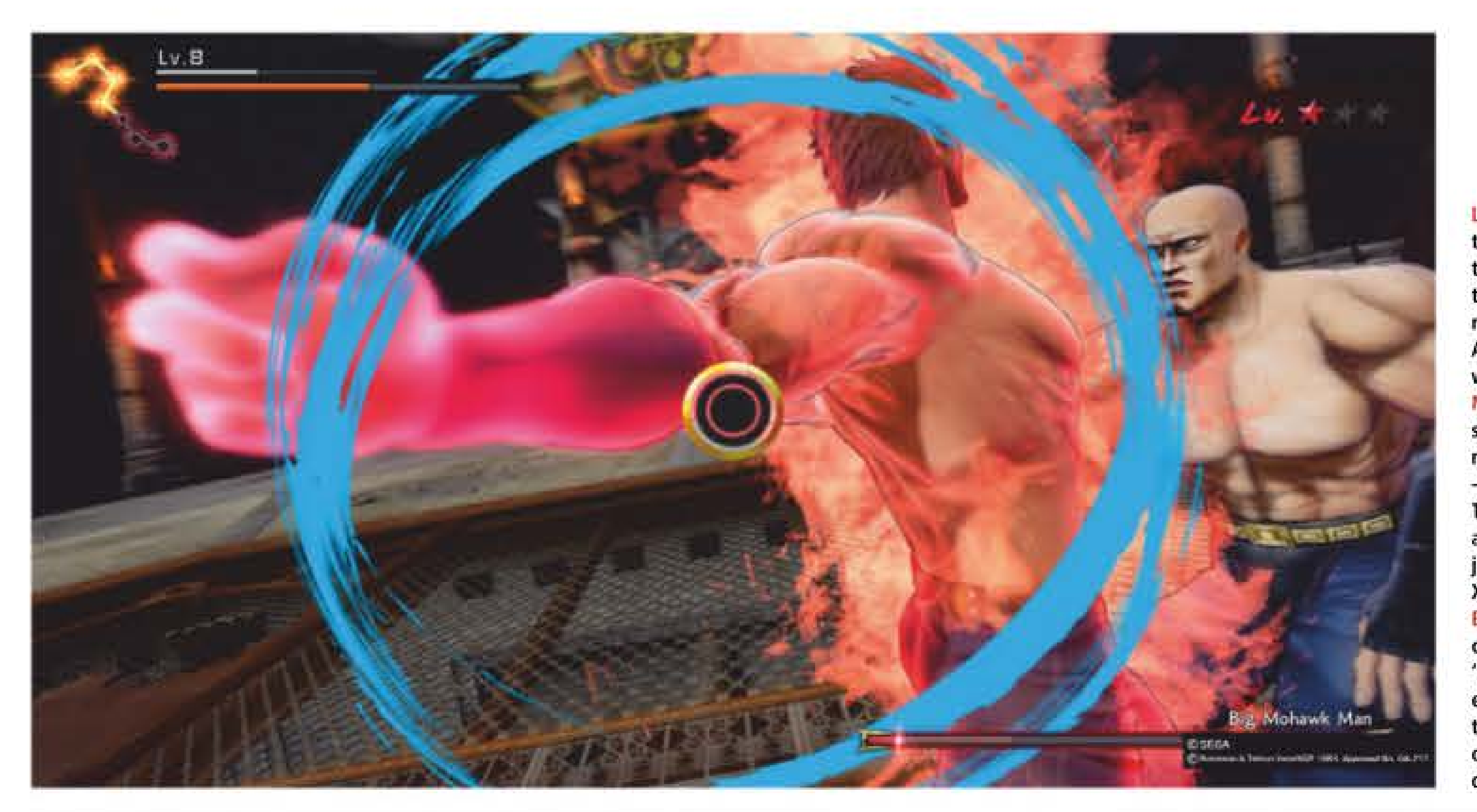
The fights come thick and fast, and so it's no great surprise that *Lost Paradise* takes care to integrate its side activities into its story. *Yakuza*'s baseball has been amusingly repurposed: rather than hitting pitches inside batting cages, Kenshiro swings a giant girder to smack speeding bandits off their bikes. There's an arm-knackering bar minigame which invites you to prepare cocktails for Eden's residents to either expand the stock in their stores or to reveal new side stories. Best of the lot is a wonderful bit of nonsense where you play a doctor in a busy clinic, darting between patients in rhythmic fashion, prodding pressure points to the beat of various songs, most notably a fantastically terrible take on Ode To Joy.

Lost Paradise is very funny throughout, in fact, tapping into a rich seam of deadpan humour. During an early jailbreak, Kenshiro simply walks to the front of his cell to be greeted with a prompt – 'Exit' – which sees him instantly bend the bars apart and stride out. The comedy isn't always intentional, mind. One character is told he looks thin after a long stretch in prison, the camera cutting to reveal a physique that would make The Rock envious. But the story's flaws are rather harder to forgive. In trying to cover as much of the manga as possible, the developer only ensures that several key characters are given short shrift. If you're not familiar with the source material, meanwhile, you'll find most fights are poorly contextualised: you'll often be asked to beat up someone you've only just met. The *Yakuza* games have always understood the value of delayed gratification, creating characters so detestable you're itching for them to get their comeuppance at Kiryu's hands. While the combat remains enjoyable, the catharsis of beating even the most annoying damage-sponge bosses proves hollow.

Still, if you're in the mood for a palate cleanser between winter's biggest banquets, you could do a lot worse. This is a pizza-and-a-six-pack kind of game: sit back, crack open a cold one and get ready to grin your way through the most gleefully stupid 20-odd hours you'll spend in front of a screen all year.

6

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS



LEFT Kenshiro's Hokuto Shinken techniques level up the more they're successfully executed, though more powerful attacks require more button presses. As such, they're only really worthwhile against larger foes. MAIN Kenshiro's Seven Star Gauge steadily fills up during combat – more quickly if you hit those QTEs – to eventually enable Burst mode. This increases attack damage, but also allows Kenshiro to pull off jumping attacks by double-tapping X. His dive-kicks are especially good. BOTTOM Cabaret customers are classed as either 'villagers' or 'ruffians', and you'll need to pre-emptively set methods to handle the rowdier clients. An apology is one option, but a more effective deterrent is to slap them about a bit





ABOVE If you're familiar with *Yakuza*'s baseball, this variant takes some getting used to: those bikers move fast, and you need to swing slightly earlier. If you enjoy brawling, meanwhile, you can fight in the Colosseum



РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

Sometimes a game's greatness sneaks up on you. And sometimes it's an individual moment of brilliance that convinces you of it. World 2-2 of Asobi Team's VR platformer, a stage called Beachside Boogie, is one such moment. It is that rarest and most precious of things: an enjoyable underwater level. And yet it's as we emerge at the end that the magic happens. Breaking the surface, we become aware of fronds of seaweed dangling in front of our face. Turning to the right, we see a mirror: a robot wearing a snorkel and a slimy kelp wig peers back. Our gaze is drawn to another robot playing keepy-uppy: our tiny charge, Astro, engages it in a short-lived kickabout, before we follow suit, destroying a larger variant with a game of steadily quickening head tennis. There's just enough time to kick in a sandcastle (rewarded by a cascade of coins) before we head for the end-level goal, and realise we've not stopped smiling for the last five minutes.

When playing any VR platformer, it's natural to imagine what a developer like Nintendo EAD might do with the tech. It says much for *Astro Bot Rescue Mission* that you'll probably find yourself thinking, 'Pretty much this'. Its trick is to give you a physical presence within the game. As in most thirdperson VR games, you observe the action from a slightly elevated position, but here you take a more active role, with the controller in your hands also afforded a place in the virtual world. While it's mostly used to control Astro in relatively conventional fashion, every so often you'll find a large chest into which you can slot it to unlock a new attachment, aimed with the DualShock's gyros and fired via the touchpad. A nozzle lets you water flowers and douse flames, while a grapnel lets you latch onto hooks to pull out platforms or create tightropes for Astro to teeter across. With a shuriken launcher you can sweep a finger forward to hurl throwing stars, cutting through spider webs and bamboo canes and even creating temporary platforms when you embed them in wooden surfaces. It revisits some of these ideas, but never so much that you tire of them.

When you're not equipped with any extras, the platforming itself is fairly basic. Activated by holding X in mid-air, Astro's jet heels are functionally similar to *Super Mario Sunshine*'s FLUDD, albeit with a shorter hover time. Despite a perspective that should make gauging Astro's position in 3D space easier, you'll need to make plenty of mid-air adjustments, and the jets let you see exactly where you're about to land. Otherwise there are no special techniques to master, and the odd spinning or collapsing platform aside, not an awful lot to really test your twitch skills.

That's less of a problem than you'd think, because there's more to *Astro Bot* beyond the straightforward running and jumping. You might be called upon for something as crude as headbutting an obstacle, whether it's in Astro's way or simply obscuring your view. If there's a projectile to hand, you can look at an enemy to lock onto it, and your little friend's aim will be unerring. Your ultimate objective is to retrieve five pieces of Astro's broken ship, but until then your main aim is to rescue your missing crewmates – variously resting, hiding, tied up or otherwise trapped in the non-boss stages. You'll often hear them before you see them: your initial instinct will be to reach for the right stick, before you remember that your head is the camera, and you can simply turn around, lean and peek or even stand up to spot the hapless bot. There's still the small matter of getting Astro over to them, at which point a boot up the backside will send them flying over to the in-game controller, with any others you've previously rescued popping up to greet them before they cram themselves back inside.

There are countless charming little touches like this, with new ideas introduced up to and including the final encounter. You'll arrive at a haunted house where the controller becomes a torch, not only lighting the way, but revealing translucent platforms, flashing ectoplasm-spitting ghosts and freezing gargoyle statues to trigger rising platforms. There's a minecart level of sorts that's more like a rollercoaster, the track eventually snaking up to the ceiling so you're gazing up at it from below. You'll duck and dodge missiles that are fired directly at you rather than Astro, while in one thrilling late-game boss fight, you'll need to shake off a squid that attaches itself to your visor. On a return visit to Beachside Boogie, we glance around and notice the same boss swimming around in the background: the kind of tiny detail a lot of players will miss, but that makes these worlds feel all the more envelopingly alive.

The things it gets wrong are equally small. Despite the 3D audio, it can be hard to pinpoint where the robots' cries are coming from – and easy to confuse them with Astro's own chirps – and if you can't find them quickly, the squeaky sound becomes a nagging annoyance. Now and again, checkpoints are spaced a little too widely, which tends to coincide with an uptick in the number of enemies and hazards, or moments where your attention has to be in two places at once. And the reach of Astro's melee attack feels a touch ungenerous, compounded by some iffy collision detection and occasionally unhelpful views.

Otherwise, *Astro Bot*'s biggest problem is that it will only ever reach a fraction of the audience for the likes of *Crash*, *Spyro*, *Ape Escape* – or, indeed, any of the other 3D platformers that made their name on PlayStation. And that's a real pity, because it's better than any of them. There are some VR games that still make our stomachs flip, but this captivating adventure is one to make the heart soar.

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Developer Asobi Team, SIE Japan Studio
Publisher SIE
Format PSVR
Release Out now

> There's more to Astro Bot beyond the straightforward running and jumping



AND BOTS MORE

A goggle-eyed chameleon is hidden within each stage: find it and you'll unlock one of over two dozen challenges. Some are rudimentary 'beat the boss without getting hit' tasks, but others are more inventive. The very first gives you a minute to finish a stage by bouncing on trampolines to the finish. Later, you'll be asked to negotiate a claustrophobic underwater gauntlet without touching the electrical hazards around the edges. Another sees you leaping between floating leaves to climb a tree, grabbing rings to beat a target score. Success earns you gold and silver robots to add to your crew, which you can find alongside a crane-grabber machine inside your ship. These gachapon contain parts of a series of themed 360-degree dioramas for Astro to romp around: essentially the most expensive, elaborate hamster runs you've ever seen.

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS



ABOVE The game tracks your gaze and rewards you for simply staring. Look down at Astro for a couple of seconds and you'll get a cheery wave; these colourful flowers, meanwhile, are visibly delighted that you noticed them







TOP Tightropes aren't just to be held in place while Astro tiptoes across them: you can lift and reorientate them to reach secret areas and robot friends. MAIN Negotiating narrow ledges and girders isn't nearly as nerve-wracking as it might look. Get too close to the edge and Astro will wobble rather than fall off. LEFT With its rotating platforms and spinning wheels, this stage is about as tough as the platforming gets – though even here, any miscalculations can be easily corrected with Astro's hover boots

РЕЛИЗ ПОДГОТОВИЛА ГРУППА "What's News" VK.COM/WSNWS

Super Mario Party

Arguably, *Mario Party*'s biggest problem has always been Nintendo itself: it's a multiplayer-focused series from a creator that has consistently provided better options. Recently, new entries have felt like obligations, born of commercial concerns rather than any urgent creative need to make another. But in a lean year for Nintendo as a developer, this is something approaching a series best, and a fine bet for Switch owners seeking a new firstparty game for holiday gatherings. Especially if *Smash* doesn't float your boat.

Talking of boats brings us to one of the best modes: a cooperative game where four players paddle a dinghy downstream, with Joy-Cons as oars. After plunging down waterfalls, steering around rocks and swerving Cheep Cheeps, you'll want to aim for the minigame balloons that invite you to work together, with high ranks extending your time. With *Out Run*-style forks every so often, there are multiple routes to the end, though even on your first run you're likely to play at least one minigame twice. In the absence of *Rhythm Paradise* on Switch, Sound Stage might be the next-best thing: a motion-based mode where you shake the Joy-Con to the beat, to tug tablecloths from beneath wine glass towers or skewer fruit lobbed by distant Lakitus.

There are five gems to collect across different game types, including a singleplayer mode which invites you to complete 80 consecutive challenges – though the reward isn't quite as special as all the pageantry suggests

Developer Nd Cube
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now



MULTISWITCH
Four of the best games lie down a pipe in the main hub. They're tucked away because they work much better with two Switches, even if only one demands it: the simple but captivating Banana Split, which asks you to move two screens to form a complete bunch, swiping across to make the connection. A tank battle lets you shoot between both displays, while the potentially friendship-ruining Puzzle Hustle sees you attempt to work as a foursome to reassemble fragmented Mario sprites.

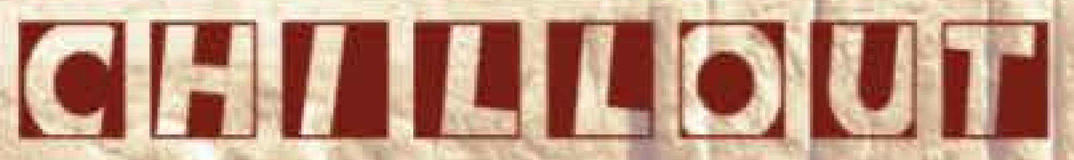
The addition of recruitable allies and individual dice blocks adds a mild element of strategy to the standard Party mode. A Bowser die might lose you coins, but it's worth risking when there's a chance of moving ten spaces; Daisy guarantees you a three or four, which is useful when you're within reach of those all-important stars. Shrewd play, however, only gets you so far. This is *Mario Party*, after all, a series that delights in screwing you over even after the final turn. Bonus stars can be awarded for the most trivial accomplishments: ironically, we earned one narrow victory only after the prize was handed out for 'unluckiest player'. During Partner Party mode, in which you can roam freely around repurposed boards, we ended up with five allies for a tug-of-war game against an opponent with just one. But that's part of the fun: the playing field may be uneven, but at some point everyone gets tripped up.

You'll be howling at your TV, then, but most often with a smile on your face, thanks largely to a strong selection of minigames. The riotous Slaparazzi sees you violently jostling for prime spot on a photograph, while a motion-controlled steak-cooking challenge is a surprising hit – though the messy Pie Hard isn't *quite* as good as its name. But with a generous array of modes and some unexpected creative flourishes, this is certainly the best *Mario Party* since the GameCube era; perhaps even beyond.





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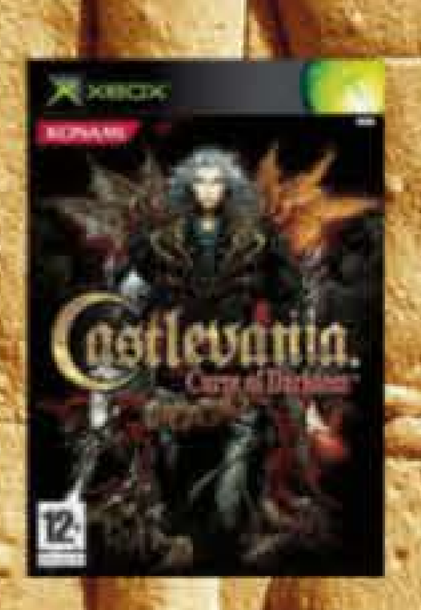





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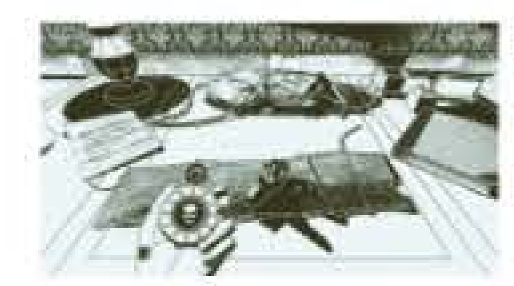
Return Of The Obra Dinn

Modestly described as an "insurance adventure", Lucas Pope's long-gestating puzzler seems at first glance to be another narrative-led game where the excitement is over before you arrive. It's 1807, and the eponymous merchant vessel, considered lost at sea four years earlier, has floated back into port as a ghost ship littered with corpses. Your job is to account for all 60 names on the original manifest, determining how (and occasionally if) they died, and who – or what – killed them, with the help of a magical pocket-watch that rewinds to the moment the victim's life ended.

Or, rather, a few moments before. Against a blank screen with subtitles you'll hear the build-up to each swing of the reaper's scythe. It's grisly stuff, the dialogue mostly limited to panicked arguments, screams and pained yelps, accompanied by sickening crunches, squelches and bloody gurgling. This steels you for the visual reveal, unveiled in the game's distinctive '1bit' style like a magician's prestige, with several guaranteed to make you gasp. The first big surprise comes early on, causing you to check your assumptions about what kind of tale this is: it's a yellowback adventure story, essentially, expertly rearranged with its nonlinear chronology preserving its mysteries as long as possible.

Six different visual filters based on vintage monochrome monitors are available, but this is a handsome game regardless of your choice – with the added bonus that performance is smooth on even low-end hardware

Developer/publisher 3909 LLC
Format PC
Release Out now



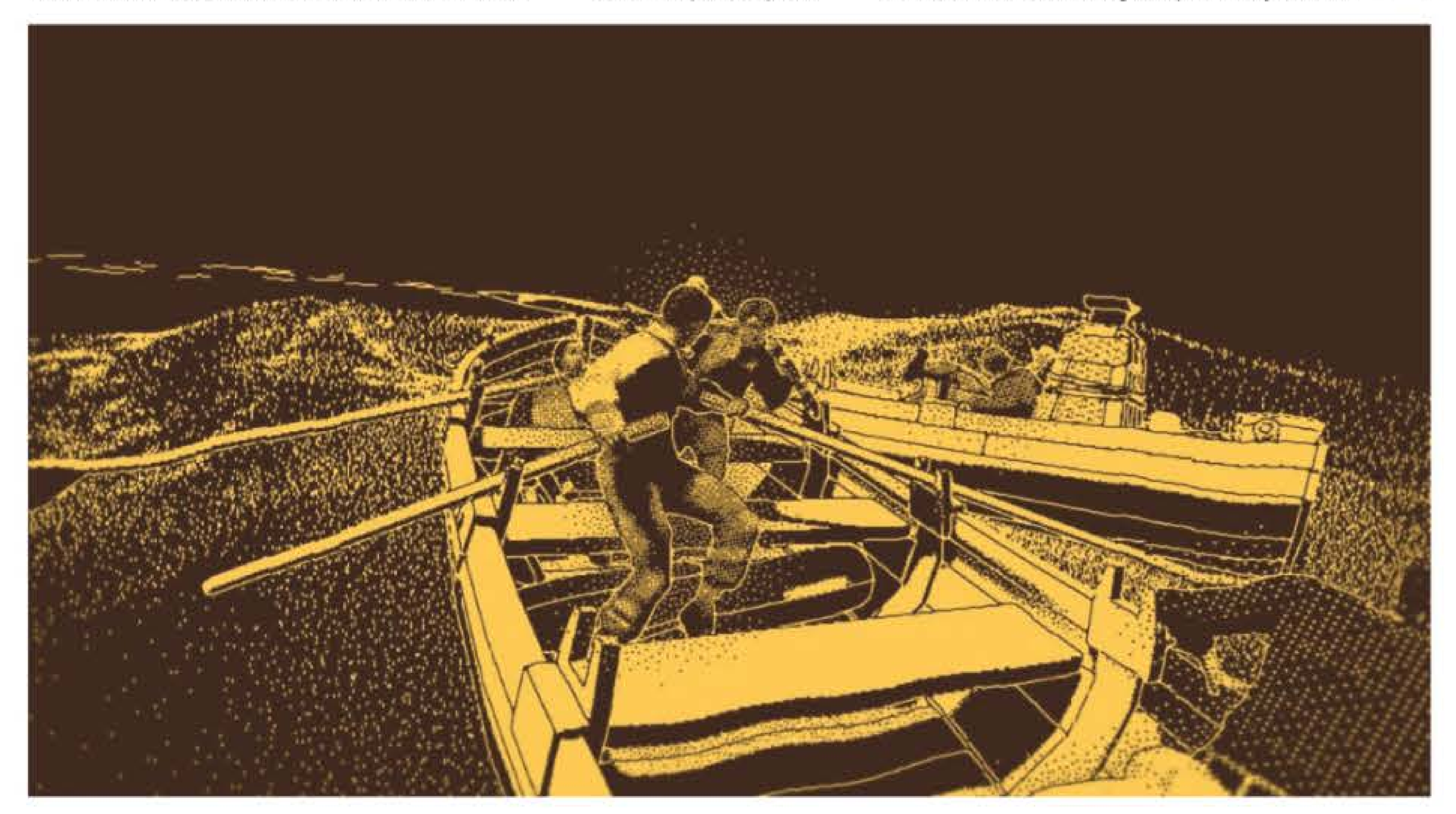
OBRA AND OUT

Not all corpses have been preserved, though you can make an educated guess about their fates from their last known position, and you'll likely find your gut instinct serves you well. The final chapter – of the game, but not the story – is only unlocked when you've correctly filled in 58 of the 60 entries. It's not essential to finish the game, though it fills in a crucial gap in the plot, rewarding the most patient and thorough investigators.

Which naturally includes the identities of the lost. One corpse leads to another with alarming speed in the inelegant early stages, where a total lack of information leads you to fumble with an interface that never *quite* becomes second nature, before you're suddenly given clues on how to progress. Decisive information is rare, you're told. You must deduce identities through various means: examining blueprints of the ship, checking numbers and nationalities on the manifest, studying faces, uniforms, positions and assumed roles. To prevent you brute-forcing individual fates, you have to get three correct at once – and having your handwritten guesses confirmed with the permanence of a typed entry is particularly satisfying, since it comes with the realisation you've done all the hard work yourself.

You're more coroner than detective, in truth. The coldly analytical process, though fitting given your position, tells you far more about how these victims died than how they lived – even if you can sympathise with the combination of hubris, poor choices and good old-fashioned bad luck that brought them to their sticky ends. And as macabre as it sounds, you'll enjoy watching them die. With an eye and an ear for the theatrical, the wonderfully evocative staging turns you into a horrified, fascinated voyeur; you might be late for the Obra Dinn's fateful voyage, but you have a front-row seat to its frequently thrilling demise.

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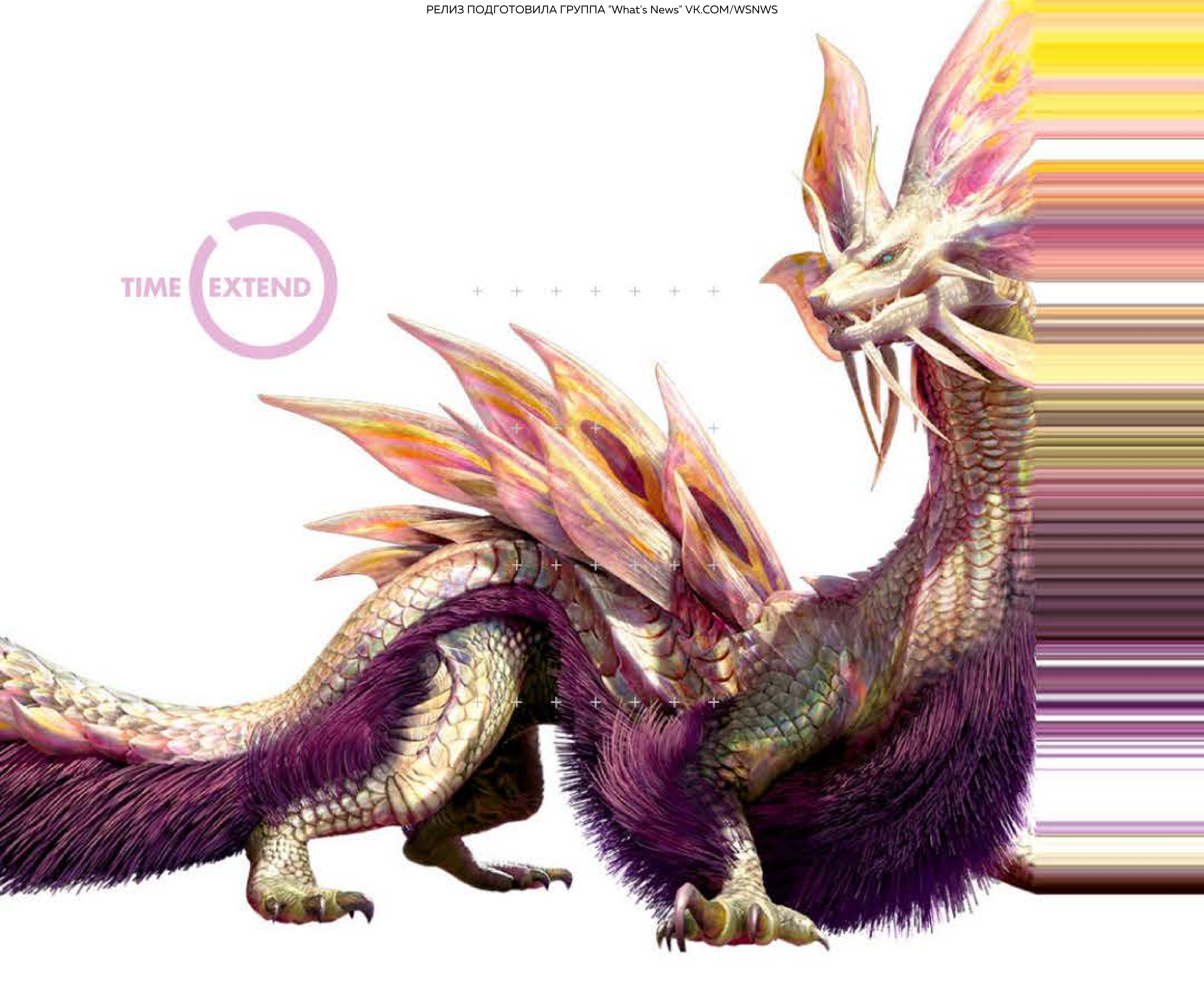
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TIME EXTEND



Monster Hunter Generations

How returning to the past revealed the beating heart of the hunt

By Alex Wiltshire

Developer/publisher Capcom **Format** 3DS, Switch **Release** 2016

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Pack ten mega potions, five pickaxes and five bug nets. Some antidote, shock and pit traps, and perhaps a set of tranquilliser bombs. Bowgun ammo and bow coatings, if they're your weapons of choice, and cool or hot drinks, if you'll need them. Next, sit with your fellow hunters to eat a meal. And then, only then, the hunt can begin. *Monster Hunter* is a game of rituals, of routines and rites which help you feel like a fearless master of the wilds, a hunter who can halt a wyvern the size of a house.

Few games quite capture the same sense of gently escalating proficiency, as you learn the many layers of mechanics that have accumulated around the series over its five core games, and many more remixed ports and expansions. Carting, traps, applying status effects, skill thresholds, body location weaknesses, where to find rare bugs, ores and mushrooms, habitat preferences, palico abilities, coatings, phials, oil, essences: *Monster Hunter*'s depths are broad and demanding. Even veteran hunters can be forgiven for knowing little of how many of the weapons work, or for needing to be reminded of the arcane relationship between a weapon's damage output and its power, elemental bonus, affinity and sharpness. This is a game in which rituals help ground and disseminate the weight of knowledge it takes to climb the hunter ranks, from Low to High to G.

When *Monster Hunter Generations* was released in Japan in late 2015, 10 years after the first *Monster Hunter* appeared on PS2, it was the largest game in the series. It was the culmination of all the best creatures, locations, weapons, systems and mechanical flourishes that have appeared across its history. It's a vast game, requiring hundreds of hours to unlock every feature, craft every armour set and weapon, and master every beast. And while it once again sucked happy fans into its defining loop of killing monsters, turning their carcasses into powerful gear, and using it to face more powerful monsters, *Generations* was also a line in the sand. This was the ultimate version of *Monster Hunter*. But was this really the best it can be? When a culture becomes defined by rituals, conventions naturally follow. And *Monster Hunter* was so shot through with conventions that it was hard to know if they were part of what made it truly great, and what was mere tradition.

In January this year, an insight into the answer came in the form of *Monster Hunter World*. The game was built for the current generation of consoles, rather than the PSP and 3DS handhelds that had been the series' key platforms since its emergence on PS2. And with that shift came sweeping changes to *Monster Hunter*'s format that made it feel like a radical departure from 13 years of built-up cruft.

For a start, it removed zones, the discreet areas in which all the previous *Monster Hunter* games split their maps. Each broken by a loading screen, zones fold the action into bubbles which impose a distinctive rhythm of progression from zone to zone as you search for a monster, and the ability to escape battle by simply crossing the threshold to the next area. It's pure weird videogame abstraction: a necessity for the networking capacity of a PS2 and 3DS, perhaps, but not for a modern console. And it's often irritating when the fray nears the path to the next zone and a monster bashes you over the threshold, fixing you in a loading screen just when your hunting party needs you most. Surely it was time to ditch it.

World's move to naturalistically open maps immediately felt more organic and alive than any in the series before it, with expanses of plains, forests, deserts and swamps to roam, vistas you can actually travel into, and monsters which freely, and visibly, roam through them, rather than teleport from zone to zone.

Then there are the little things – removals of inconsistencies and irritants that seemed to litter the previous games. In *World* you no longer have to stand still to quaff a potion, so you're not entirely helpless when you're at your most vulnerable. Forgotten to bring a stack of nullberries with you? All your stuff is available from a chest in the base camp. You don't have to spend time combining items because the game can automatically do it as you collect ingredients in the field, and you don't even have to stop running to gather them. And now we have scoutflies, which provide a breadcrumb trail that takes you

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straight to the beast. No need to mark them and memorise their favoured domains.

After all, in leading us directly to the monsters, *World*'s scoutflies help pull focus and emphasis to exactly what the series is meant to be about. Convenience after convenience pushed a fingernail under the idea that maybe all those years of rituals, of learning monster habits, of fussing with trivialities, had been futile. Had our relationship with *Monster Hunter* been a manifestation of some kind of Stockholm syndrome in which we mistook routine work for fun? When *Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate* was finally released in the west on Switch, it offered another opportunity to review *Monster Hunter*'s design, now in the light of *World*'s streamlining.

For a seasoned hunter, there's a certain nostalgia in stepping back into old *Monster Hunter*. You spent countless hours in its villages, many of which are recreated in *Generations*, and you got to know its side characters, many of whom pop in to *Generations* to say hello. But there was something more to why *Ultimate*, despite its reintroduction of all the old cruft, felt like more than a sentimental visit from a doddery old relative. At the heart of that lies the Hunters Hub, the multiplayer lobby area known as the Gathering Hall in previous *Monster Hunter* games.

Whether you know your hunting partners or are playing with randoms, the Hub is where your party of four becomes a team. It's awkward and counter-intuitive, and it's all about rituals and routines. And that's exactly why it's the social spine of the hunt. Any player can post a quest, which means running over to the Guildmarm and navigating a series of menus to select the one they want. To actually head out on a quest, the other players have to go to separate board to sign up for it.



Though fundamentally a huge *Monster Hunter 4* remix album, *Generations* added various game-changing features, most notably Hunter Arts, which completely mix up playstyles

There are many reasons to choose a quest. Perhaps you're after gear crafted from a certain monster, so you're hunting it over and over. Or perhaps you're playing through key quests for the rank you're on so you can progress to the next. Whatever the case, *Ultimate* presents you with such a vast and open-ended sprawl of options that every player is after a different thing. So when it comes to all four players agreeing to sign up for the same quest, conducted amid eating together and readying items with emotes, pre-canned responses and clipped, controller-typed lines, delicacy is important. It's customary for the room's host to hold seniority. It's bad form for a player who's just joined a room to immediately open a quest and expect everyone to sign up for it. Good form is to help each other, doing other players' quests before putting your own forward.

HAD OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH MONSTER HUNTER BEEN A MANIFESTATION OF SOME KIND OF STOCKHOLM SYNDROME?

There are terrible rooms, where a player leaves their hunter idling while everyone else waits for them to ready up, or where a pair of hunters post quests for each other and ignore the other members. But there are



Ultimate's monster roster includes such great obscurities as the Japan-only *Monster Hunter Portable 3rd*'s Amatsu

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GEAR UP

It's hard to fault *World* for its comparatively low number of monsters compared to that in *Generations*, since it had to entirely reskin, animate and fundamentally reinvent each beast. But the low count led to a small range of armour sets and weapons to craft, and that led to players tending to wear the same gear, limitations for strategies for armour bonuses, and a shortened endgame. To go on to play *Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate*, which has 93 monsters, is to see a multitude of different armour sets on other players, allowing for far broader fashion-minded play and the chance to explore a dizzying range of abilities and playstyles. And beyond that, it helps lend the sense that you're one hunter among many others, reinforcing the sense of fellowship within a cadre that so much else about the game sets up.



Generations' vast sprawl of quests and absence of a storyline to pull players through resist any particular focus, but *Ultimate*'s 'flagship' monster, the rocket-powered Valstrax, still provides a strong presence

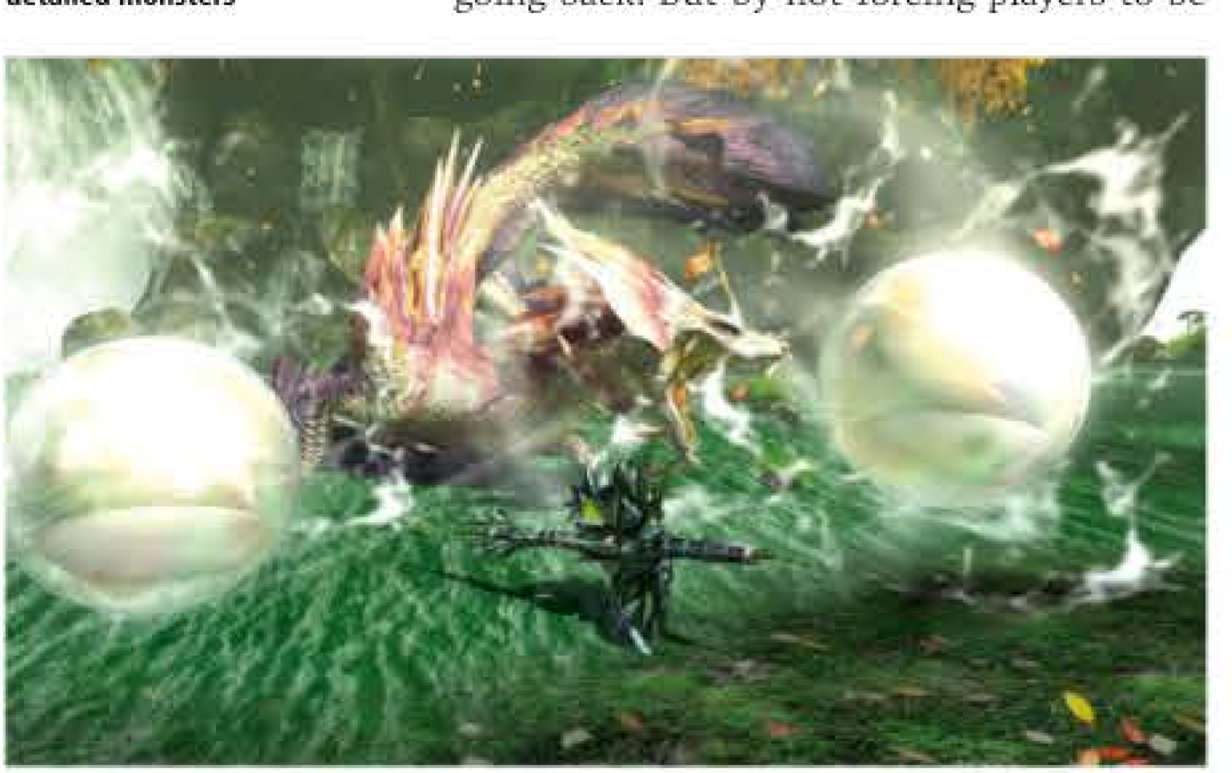
also great rooms, where friendships are forged in the fire of a Dreadking Rathalos' breath, where camaraderie springs in playing the same mission over and over, so everyone can score the 'urgent' quest that acts as key to moving to a new rank. When you find yourself in one, a great room easily outweighs – and is even pushed into striking relief by – the frustrations of the lesser ones. It's hunter society, for good and ill, and you feel part of it.

Most of the fundamentals of this system are present in *World*, but they're obscured by another effort to streamline by allowing players to sign up for new hunts without having to go back to the Gathering Hall. The intention, surely, was to introduce a new sense of flow to communal hunting by reducing the friction, the dead halt, of going back. But by not forcing players to be together, negotiating and compromising, it makes the notion of a hunting party ephemeral. Players routinely disconnect to start new hunts on their own.

So much of *Ultimate*'s resolute attachment to convention shows up how streamlining can diminish the spirit of a game. It becomes clear that having to make all your items yourself means that you learn what ingredients you need, so when you stop and search a beehive in *Ultimate*, it has more significance: its honey will make an item that will probably save your life one day. And yes, in obscuring and adding complication to so many systems and details, the game requires players to visit websites that detail lists of quests, items and abilities. It instils a sense of dedication.

As *Animal Crossing*, *Destiny* and many others have proved, the magic ingredient to conjuring a sense of progression and accomplishment in a grind-heavy game is not making your desires easy to achieve, but by continually pulling them just out of reach until just the right moment. It's a powerful trick, one which games abusive of your passion and time will misuse, but sometimes it provides a game's heart. In the light of *Ultimate*'s reestablishment of all *Monster Hunter*'s hitches and conventions, it became clear that they perform the latter. By involving you so much in all its details, *Ultimate* puts you back in the boots of a warrior dedicated to slaying giant beasts, and proves that work, routine and ritual is truly the soul of the hunt.

Displayed on a TV screen, *Ultimate* shows the artistry behind visuals that were originally conceived for 3DS, with rich effects and detailed monsters





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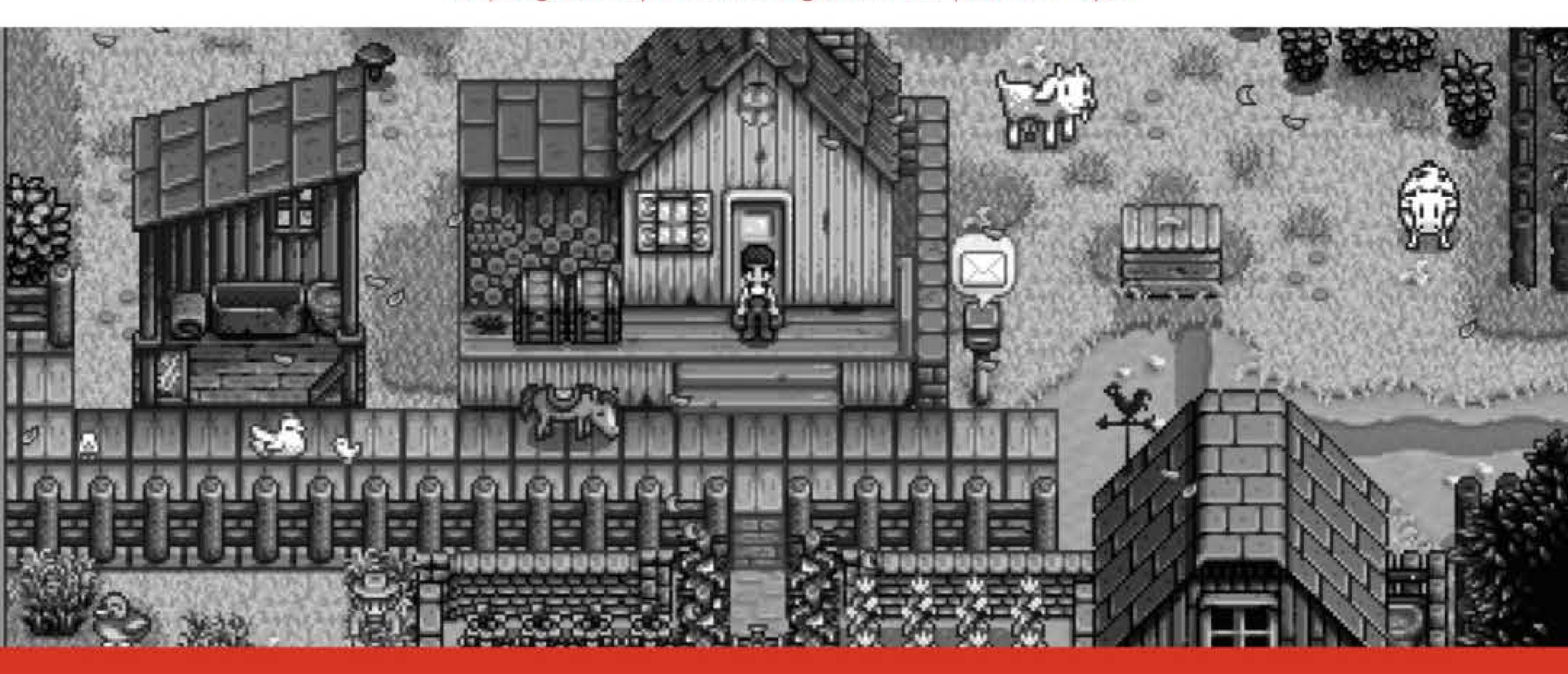
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Stardew Valley

Developer ConcernedApe **Publisher** Chucklefish **Format** Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Switch, Vita, Xbox One **Release** 2016

Filling your day in *Stardew Valley* is easy. Indeed, the sheer variety of this *Harvest Moon*-a-like has been its greatest asset: between farming, cooking, shopping, fishing, crafting, dungeon-crawling and romancing the townsfolk, there's always something to quietly cultivate, be it a crop of blueberries or a burgeoning relationship. Two years on from its original release, Eric Barone's farming sim offers even more to occupy and soothe the frazzled mind.

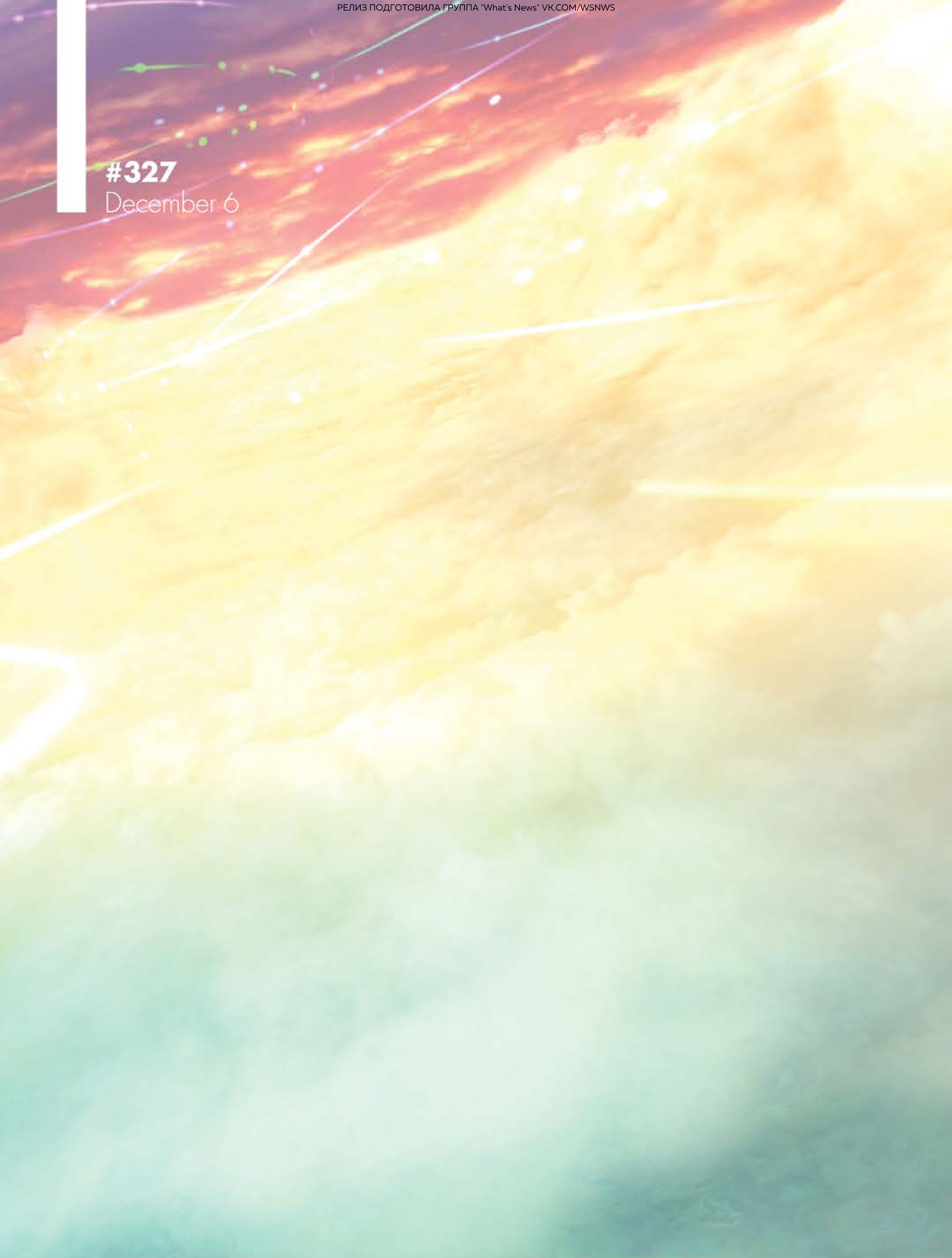
Alongside ports to various formats, a series of free updates has helped *Stardew Valley* grow. New items, buildings, community events and character interactions have provided plenty of reasons to revisit your farm. But starting afresh now presents even more options. Now, you can take your pick of five farm types – standard, riverland, forest, hill-top and wilderness – each with their own characteristics. The forest farm might have less space than the standard farm, but its foraging benefits make it simple to earn quick cash early on. The wilderness farm is dangerous for inexperienced players, but old (farm) hands will delight in rare resources in their front yard.

There's more scope than ever to organise your farm precisely the way you like it, then – which is why the disruptive recent addition of multiplayer is such a stroke of genius. While the mechanics of co-op remain virtually identical to singleplayer, you can invite up to three friends into an existing save by building a cabin on your farm for a small fee. Alternatively, you can start a new co-op save with pre-selected cabins, even altering profit margins to balance out the extra help.

And what a difference it makes. In the early days of singleplayer, our paltry energy meter is exhausted almost immediately; with a partner, we're a well-oiled machine from the get-go, with the shared labour meaning we've got land cleared, crops planted and enough wood to fix the bridge over to the beach by the end of the third day. The pacing is far less frustrating.

Still, the risk of becoming *too* workmanlike is there: with players sharing resources, not communicating properly can result in some nasty mayonnaise-based disagreements. And afterwards, a moment of clarity – that *Stardew Valley* has always been about escape, not efficiency, and that anyone yelling at their mates about their parsnip yield may as well pack it up and go work for Joja Corp. A relaxing, hangout-friendly multiplayer mode is a wonderful way, then, to quickly get to the heart of *Stardew Valley*: a game about not living to work, but working to live, and about filling your days with the things that really matter. ■

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